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**AVON  
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READER**

**No. 2**

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# Contents and Acknowledgements

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PRIESTESS OF THE FLAME <i>by Sewell Peaslee Wright</i> .....	3
Copyright, 1932, by The Clayton Magazines, Inc.; reprinted by consent of the author with arrangement through Ackerman Fantasy Agency.	
THE WHISPERERS <i>by Donald Wandrei</i> .....	26
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WHEN HALF-WORLDS MEET <i>by John Michel</i> .....	39
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THE SUPERPERFECT BRIDE <i>by Bob Olsen</i> .....	53
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VULTHOOM <i>by Clark Ashton Smith</i> .....	70
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THE MAN WHO DISCOVERED NOTHING <i>by Ray Cummings</i> ....	89
Copyright, 1921, by The Frank A. Munsey Co. By permission of the author.	
HIGHWAY <i>by Robert W. Lowndes</i> .....	95
Reprinted by special permission of Columbia Publications, Inc., and the author.	
WHEN THE FLAME FLOWERS BLOSSOMED <i>by Leslie F. Stone</i> ..	105
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THE BOOK OF WORLDS <i>by Miles J. Breuer, M.D.</i> .....	115
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THE REBUFF <i>by Lord Dunsany</i> .....	124
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# Priestess of the Flame

by Sewell Peaslee Wright

## SACRIFICE TO THE LUST QUEEN OF THE FLAME RITE

*Superstition is one of the curses of our little planet's development. It has probably done more to slow up the course of progress than any other mental state and it has been with us since the dawn of primeval progress. It goes without argument that in some future era, when worlds must live with worlds on the basis of peace and mutual trust, that an upflare of superstition on some panicky planet could prove to be a serious thing. The Priestess of the Flame Rite that arose in the days of the Stellar Patrol of which S. P. Wright speaks knew what a dangerous weapon she had. So dangerous that it required the super-scientific efforts of a cosmic federation to combat it.*

I HAVE been rather amused by the protests which have come to me regarding the "disparaging" comments I have made, in previous tales of the Special Patrol Service, regarding women. The rather surprising thing about it is that the larger proportion of these have come from men. Young men, of course.

Now, as a matter of fact, a careful search has failed to reveal to me any very uncomplimentary remarks. I have suggested, I believe, that women have, in my experience, shown a sad lack of ability to understand mechanical contrivances. Perhaps I have pictured some few of them as frivolous and shallow. If I have been unfair, I wish now to make humble apology.

I am not, as some of my correspondents have indicated, a bitter old man, who cannot remember his youth. I remember it very well indeed, else these tales would not be forthcoming. And women have their great and proper place, even in a man's universe.

Some day, perhaps, the mood will seize me to write of my own love affair. That surprises you? You smile to think that old John Hanson, lately a commander of the Special Patrol Service, now retired, should have had a love affair? Well, 'twas many years ago, before these eyes lost their fire, and before these brown, skinny hands wearied as quickly as they weary now. . . .

But I have known many women—good women and bad; great women and women of small souls; kindly women, and women fierce as wild beasts are fierce. Divinity has dealt lavishly with women; has given them an emotional range far greater than man's. They can sink to depths unknown to

masculinity; they can rise to heights of love and sacrifice before which man can only stand with reverently bowed head and marvel.

This is a story of a woman—one of those no man could know and not remember. I make no apologies for her; I pay her no homage. I record only a not inaccurate account of an adventure of my youth, in which she played a part; I leave to you the task of judging her.

We were some three days out from Base, as I recall it, on a mission which promised a welcome interlude in a monotonous sequence of routine patrols. I was commander then of the *Ertak*, one of the crack ships of the Service, and assisted by the finest group of officers, I believe, that any man ever had under him.

I was standing a watch in the navigating room with Hendricks, my junior officer, when Correy brought us the amazing news.

Correy was my first officer, a square-jawed fighting man if one ever breathed, a man of action, such as these effete times do not produce. His eyes were fairly blazing as he came into the room, and his generous mouth was narrowed into a grim line.

"What's up, Mr. Correy?" I asked apprehensively. "Trouble aboard?"

"Plenty of it, sir!" he snapped. "A stowaway!"

"A stowaway?" I repeated wonderingly. A new experience, but hardly cause for Correy's obvious anger. "Well, send him below, and tell Miro to put him to work—the hardest work he can find. We'll make him—"

"*Him?*" blurted Correy. "If it were a him it wouldn't be so bad, sir. But it's a *she!*"

To understand the full effect of the statement, you'd have to be steeped in the traditions of the Service. Women are seldom permitted on board a ship of the Service; despite their many admirable qualities, women play the very devil with discipline. And here were we, three days out from Base on a tour of duty which promised more than a little excitement, with a female stowaway on board!

I felt my own mouth set grimly.

"Where is she, Mr. Correy?" I asked quietly.

"In my quarters, under guard. It was my watch below, as you know, sir. I entered my stateroom, figuring on catching forty winks, and there she was, seated in my big chair, smiling at me.

"Well, for a second I couldn't speak. I just stared at her, and she kept smiling back at me. 'What are you doing here?' I managed to ask her, at last. 'Do you know where you are?'"

"I'll talk to your commanding officer," she told me, cool as you please. "Will you bring him, please!"

"You'll see him plenty soon enough," I snapped at her, getting over my surprise somewhat by that time. I called in a couple of men to keep her from getting into mischief, and reported to you. What are your orders, sir?"

I hesitated a second, wondering. From Correy's account, she must be a rather remarkable person.

"Bring her up here, if you will, Mr. Correy. I'd like to see her before we

put her in the brig.\* The brig, I might explain, was a small room well forward, where members of the crew were confined for discipline.

"Right, sir!" It seemed to me that there was a peculiar twinkle in Correy's eyes as he went out, and I wondered about it while we waited for him to return with the prisoner.

"What an infernal nuisance, sir!" complained Hendricks, looking up from his glowing charts. "We'll be the laughing-stock of the Service if this leaks out!"

"When it leaks out," I corrected him glumly. I'd already thought of the unpleasant outcome he mentioned. "I'll have to report it, of course, and the whole Service will know about it. We'll just have to grin and make the most of it, I guess." There was still another possibility which I didn't mention: the silver-sleeves at Base would very likely call me on the carpet for permitting such a thing to happen. A commander was supposed to be responsible for everything that happened; no excuses available in the Service as it was in those days.

I scowled forbiddingly as I heard Correy open the door; at least I could make her very sorry she had selected the *Ertak* for her adventure. I am afraid, however, that it was a startled, rather than a scowling face to which she lifted her eyes.

"This is the stowaway, sir," said Correy briskly, closing the door. He was watching my face, and I saw, now, the reason for the twinkle in his eye when I mentioned placing the stowaway in the brig.

The woman was startlingly beautiful; one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, and I have roamed the outer limits of space, and seen the women of many worlds. Hendricks, standing behind me, gasped audibly as his eyes fell upon her.

The stowaway was regally tall and exquisitely modeled. Her hair was the color of pale morning sunlight on Earth; her eyes an amazing blue, the equal of which I have never seen.

She was beautiful, but not coldly so. Despite her imperious bearing, there was something seductive about the soft curves of her beautiful body; something to rouse the pulses of a man in the languor of her intensely blue eyes, and the full, sensuous lips, scarlet as a smear of fresh blood.

"So this is the stowaway," I said, trying to keep my voice coolly indifferent. "What is your name?"

"I should prefer," she replied, speaking the universal language with a sibilant accent that was very fascinating, "to speak with you privately."

"You will speak with me," I informed her crisply, "in the presence of these officers. I repeat: what is your name?"

She smiled faintly, her eyes compelling mine.

"I am called Liane," she said. "Chief Priestess of the Flame, Mother of Life, Giver of Death. I believe my name and position are not unknown to you, Commander Hanson?"

Known to me? If Base was not in error—and for all their faults, the silver-sleeves are seldom wrong in matters of this sort—this woman was the reason for our present mission.

"They are known to me," I admitted. "They do not explain, however, your presence here."

"And yet they should," protested Liane gently. "I was taken from my own people by those who had no right to command me. I was subjected to the indignity of questioning by many men. I have merely taken the simplest and quickest way of returning to my own people."

"You knew, then, our destination?"

"I was informed of that by those who questioned me," nodded Liane. "Then, since I had been assured I was an honored guest, and no prisoner, I secreted myself aboard the ship, hiding in a small room nearly filled with what I took to be spare parts. I had provisions, and a few personal belongings. When I felt sufficient time had elapsed to make a return improbable, I donned attire more fitting than the masculine workman's guise in which I had secreted myself, and—I believe you are acquainted with the remaining facts."

"I am. I will consider your case and advise you later. Mr. Correy, will you conduct the stowaway to my quarters and place her under guard? Return when you have attended to this matter, and ask Mr. Kincaide to do likewise."

"To your quarters, you said, sir?" asked Correy, his eyes very serious, but not sufficiently so to entirely disguise the twinkle in their depths. "Not to the brig?"

I could cheerfully have kicked him.

"To my quarters," I repeated severely, "and under guard."

"Right, sir," said Correy.

While we were awaiting Correy and Kincaide, I briefly considered the rather remarkable story which had been told me at Base.

"Commander Hanson," the Chief of Command, had said, "we're turning over to you a very delicate mission. You've proved yourself adept at handling matters of this kind, and we have every confidence you'll bring this one to a highly successful conclusion."

"Thank you, sir; we'll do our best," I had told him.

"I know that; the assurance isn't necessary, although I appreciate it. Briefly, here's what we're confronted with:

"Lakos, as you know, is the principal source of temite for the universe. And without temite, modern space travel would be impossible; we would have to resort to earlier and infinitely more crude devices. You realize that, of course.

"Now, for some time, those in charge of operations on Lakos have complained of a growing unrest, increasing insubordination on the part of the Lakonians, and an alarming decrease in production.

"It has been extremely difficult—indeed, impossible—to determine the reasons for this, for, as you are perhaps aware, the atmosphere of Lakos is permeated with certain mineral fumes which, while not directly harmful to those of other worlds, do serve to effectively block the passage of those rays of the sun which are essential to the health of beings like ourselves. Those in charge of operations there are supplied artificially with these rays,



as you are in your ship, by means of emanations from ethon tubes, but they have to be transferred at frequent periods to other fields of activity. The constant shifting about produces a state of disorder which makes the necessary investigation impossible. Too, operations are carried on with an insufficient personnel, because it is extremely difficult to induce desirable types of volunteer for such disagreeable service.

"We have, however, determined a few very important facts. This unrest has been caused by the activities of a secret organization or order known as the Worshipers of the Flame. That's as close a translation as I can give you. It sounds harmless enough, but from what we gather, it is a sinister and rather terrible organization, with a fanatical belief amounting, at times, to a veritable frenzy. These Lakonians are a physically powerful but mentally inadequate people, as perhaps you are aware.

"The leader of this order or cult call it what you will—seems to be a woman: a very fascinating creature, infinitely superior to her people as a whole; what biologists call a 'sport,' I believe—a radical departure from the general racial trend.

"This leader calls herself Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame, Mother of Life, Giver of Death, and a few other high-sounding things. We have called her here to Base for questioning, and while she has been here some time, we have so far learned next to nothing from her. She is very intelligent, very alluring, very feminine—but reveals nothing she does not wish to reveal.

"Our purpose in having her brought here was two-fold; first, to gain what information we could from her, and if possible, prevail upon her to cease her activities; second, to deprive her cult of her leadership while you conducted your investigation.

"Your orders, then, are simple: you will proceed at once to Lakos, and inquire into the activities of this order. Somehow, it must be crushed; the means I shall leave to you. You will have complete coöperation of those in charge of operations on Lakos; they are Zenians and natives of Earth, and you may depend upon them implicitly. Do not, however, place any faith in any Lakonians; the entire native populace may well be suspected of participation in the rites of this cult, and they are a treacherous and ruthless people at best. Have you any questions, Commander?"

"None," I had told him. "I have full authority to take any action I see fit?"

"Yes, at your discretion. Of course," he had added rather hastily, "you appreciate the importance of our supply of temite. Only Lakonians can gather it in commercial quantities, under the existing conditions on Lakos, and our reserve supply is not large. We naturally wish to increase production there, rather than endanger it. It's a delicate mission, but I'm trusting you and your men to handle it for us. I know you will."

He had arisen then, smilingly, and offered his hand to me in that gesture which marks a son of Earth, throughout the universe, thus bringing the interview to a close.

In talking the things over with my officers, we had decided the mission

promised to be an interesting one, but full of difficulties. The *Ertak* had set down on Lakos more than once, and we all had unpleasant memories of the place.

The sunlight on Lakos, such as it was, was pale green and thin, lacking in warmth and vitality. The vegetation was flaccid and nearly colorless, more like a mushroom growth than anything else; and the inhabitants were suspicious and unfriendly.

Remembering the typical Lakonians, it was all the more surprising that a gracious creature like Liane could have sprung from their midst. They were a beetle-browed, dark race, with gnarled muscles and huge, knotted joints, speaking a guttural language all their own. Few spoke the universal language.

But Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame! The image of her kept drifting back to my mind. There was a woman to turn any man's head! And such a turning would be dangerous, for Liane had no soft woman's soul, if I had read her brilliant blue eyes aright.

"Rather a beauty, isn't she, sir?" commented Hendricks as I paused in my restless pacing, and glanced at the two-dimensional charts.

"The stowaway? Rather," I agreed shortly. "And chief instigator of the trouble we've been sent to eliminate."

"That seems almost—almost unbelievable, doesn't it?"

"Why, Mr. Hendricks?"

Correy and Kincaide entered before my junior officer could reply. I think he was rather glad of the excuse for not presenting his reasons.

"Well, sir, she's under guard," reported Correy. "And now what's to be done about her?"

"That," I admitted, "is a question. After all, she's an important personage at home. She was brought to Base as a guest, probably something of a guest of honor, of the Council, I gather. And, considering the work that's cut out for us, it would seem like a poor move to antagonize her unduly. What do you gentlemen think?"

"I think you're right, sir," said Hendricks quickly. "I believe she should be given every consideration."

Kincaide, my level-headed second officer, glanced curiously at Hendricks. "I see she's made one friend, anyway," he said. "Don't let yourself slip, my boy; I've run across her kind before. They're dangerous."

"Thanks, but the warning's not necessary, Mr. Kincaide," replied Hendricks stiffly, an angry flush mounting to his cheeks. "I merely expressed a requested opinion."

"We'll let that phase of it drop, gentlemen," I cut in sharply, as I saw Kincaide's eyes flash. Trust a woman to stir up strife and ill-feeling! "What shall we do with her?"

"I believe, sir," said Correy, "that we'd be nice to her. Treat her as an honored guest; make the best of a bad situation. If she's what the Chief thought she is, the boss of this outfit we've got to lick, then there's no need of stroking her the wrong way, as I see it."

"And you, Mr. Kincaide?"

"I see no other way out of it. Under the circumstances, we can't treat her like a common culprit; both her position and her sex would prevent."

"Very well, then; we seem to be agreed. We'll find suitable quarters for her—"

"I'll give her mine," put in Hendricks. "Correy will let me double up with him, I imagine."

"Sure," nodded Correy.

Kincaide glanced sharply at Hendricks, but said nothing. I knew, however, that he was thinking just what I was; that my young third officer was in for a bad, bad time of it.

Just how bad, I think neither of us guessed.

Liane became a member of the officers' mess on the *Ertak*. She occupied Hendricks' stateroom, and, I must confess, with uncommon good judgment for a woman, remained there most of the time.

She knew the reason for our mission, but this was one subject we never discussed. Nor did we mention the sect of which, according to the Chief of Command, she was the head. We did talk freely, when brought together at the table, on every other general topic.

Liane was an exceedingly intelligent conversationalist. Her voice was fascinating, and her remarks were always to the point. And she was a very good listener; she paid flattering attention to the most casual remark.

It seemed to me she was particularly gracious to Hendricks. Her strangely arresting blue eyes seldom left his face when he was speaking, and the greater portion of her remarks seemed addressed to him. Naturally, Hendricks responded as a flower responds to the warming rays of the sun.

"We'll do well, sir, to keep a weather eye on the youngster," opined Correy one morning. (I think I have previously explained that even in the unchanging darkness of space, we divided time arbitrarily into days and nights.) "Unless I'm badly mistaken, Hendricks is falling victim to a pair of blue eyes."

"He's young," I shrugged. "We'll be there in two more days, and then we'll be rid of her."

"Yes," nodded Correy, "we'll be there in a couple of days. And we'll be rid of her, I hope. But—suppose it should be serious, sir?"

"What do you mean?" I asked sharply. I had been thinking, rather vaguely, along much the same lines, but to hear it put into words came as rather a shock.

"I hope I'm wrong," said Correy very gravely. "But this Liane is an unusual woman. When I was his age, I could have slipped rather badly myself. Her eyes—that slow smile—they do things to a man."

"At the same time, Liane is supposed to be the head of the thing we're to stamp out; you might say the enemy's leader. And it wouldn't be a good thing, sir, to have a—a friend of the enemy on board the *Ertak*, would it?"

A rebuke rose to my lips, but I checked it. After all, Correy had no more than put into words some fears which had been harassing me.

A traitor—in the Service? Perhaps you won't be able to understand just what that thought meant to those of us who wore the Blue and Silver in

those days. But a traitor was something we had never had. It was almost unbelievable that such a thing would ever happen; that it could ever happen. And yet older men than Hendricks had thrown honor aside at the insistence of women less fascinating than Liane.

I had felt the lure of her personality; there was not one of us on board the *Ertak* who had not. And she had not exercised her wiles on any of us save Hendricks; with the shrewdness which had made her the leader she was, she had elected to fascinate the youngest, the weakest, the most impressionable.

"I'll have a talk with him, Mr. Correy," I said quietly. "Probably it isn't necessary; I trust him implicitly, as I am sure you do, and the rest of us."

"Certainly, sir," Correy replied hastily, evidently relieved by the manner in which I had taken his remarks. "Only, he's very young, sir, and Liane is a very fascinating creature."

I kept my promise to Correy the next time Hendricks was on watch.

"We'll be setting down in a couple of days," I commented casually. "It'll be good to stretch our legs again, won't it?"

"It certainly will, sir."

"And I imagine that's the last we'll see of our fair stowaway," I said, watching him closely.

Hendricks' face flushed and then drained white. With the tip of his forefinger he traced meaningless geometrical patterns on the surface of the instrument table.

"I imagine so, sir," he replied in a choked voice. And then, suddenly, in a voice which shook with released emotion, "Oh, I know what you're thinking!" he added. "What you've all been thinking; you sir, and Correy and Kincaide. Probably the men, too, for that matter."

"But it's not so! I want you to believe that, sir. I may be impressionable, and certainly she is beautiful and—and terribly fascinating; but I'm not quite a fool. I realize she's on the other side; that I can't, that I must not, permit myself to care. You—you do believe that, sir?"

"Of course, lad!" I put my hand reassuringly on his shoulder; his whole body was shaking. "Forget it; forget her as soon as you can. None of us have doubted you for an instant; we just—wondered."

"I could see that; I could feel it. And it hurt," said my junior officer with shame-faced hesitancy. "But I'll forget her—after she's gone."

I let it go at that. After all, it was a rather painful subject for us both. The next day it did seem that he treated her with less attention; and she noticed it, for I saw the faint shadow of a frown form between her perfect brows, and her glance traveled meditatively from Hendricks' flushed face to my own.

The next morning, after the first meal of the day, she walked down the passage with me, one slim white hand placed gently within the curve of my arm.

"Mr. Hendricks," she commented softly, "seems rather distraught the last day or so."

"Yes?" I said, smiling to myself, and wondering what was coming next.

"Yes, Commander Hanson." There was just the faintest suggestion of steeliness in her voice now. "I fancy you've been giving him good advice, and painting me in lurid colors. Do you really think so badly of me?" Her hand pressed my arm with warm friendliness; her great blue eyes were watching me with beseeching interest.

"I think, Liane," I replied, "that Mr. Hendricks is a very young man."

"And that I am a dangerous woman?" She laughed softly.

"That, at least," I told her, "your interests and ours are not identical."

"True," she said coolly, pausing before the door of her stateroom. Her hand dropped from my arm, and she drew herself up regally. In the bright flow of the ethon tubes overhead, she was almost irresistibly beautiful. "Our interests are not identical, Commander Hanson. They are widely divergent, directly opposed to each other, as a matter of fact. And—may I be so bold as to offer you a bit of advice?"

I bowed, saying nothing.

"Then, don't attempt to meddle with things which are more powerful than you and the forces you control. And—don't waste breath on Mr. Hendricks. Fair warning!"

Before I could ask for more complete explanation, she had slipped inside her stateroom and firmly closed the door.

We set down on Lakos late that afternoon, close to the city—town, rather—of Gio, where those in charge of operations made their headquarters. With Liane and Correy, leaving the ship in charge of Kincaide, I made my way quickly toward the headquarters building.

We had gone but a few steps when Liane was surrounded by a shouting throng of her fellow Lakonians, and with a little mocking wave of a white hand, she stepped into a sort of litter which had been rushed to the scene, and was carried away.

"For one," commented Correy with a sigh of relief, "I'm glad she's out of sight. If I never see her again, it'll be too soon. When do we start something?"

"Not until we've talked with Fetter, who's in command here. I have a letter for him from the Chief. We'll see what he has to say."

One thing was certain; we could look for no assistance of any kind from the natives. They regarded us with bleak scowls, from beneath shaggy, lowering brows, our uniforms of blue, with the silver ornaments of our service and rank, identifying us clearly.

In the greenish Lakonian twilight, they were sinister figures indeed, clothed all alike in short, sleeveless tunics, belted loosely at the waist, feet and legs encased in leather buskins reaching nearly to the knees, their brown, gnarled limbs and stoop-shouldered postures giving them a half-bestial semblance which was disturbing. Their walk was a sort of slow shuffle, which made their long arms dangle, swinging disjointedly.

We entered the administration building of gray, dull stone, and were ushered immediately into the office of the head of operations.

"Hanson?" he greeted me. "Mighty glad to see you. You too, Correy."

Terrible hole, this; hope you're not here for long. Sorry I couldn't meet you at the ship; got your radio, but couldn't make it. Everything's in a jam. Getting worse all the time. And we're shorthanded; not half enough men here. Sit down, sit down. Seem good to feel firm ground under your feet?"

"Not particularly; your air here isn't as good as the *Ertak's*." Correy and I seated ourselves across the desk from the garrulous Fetter. "I've a letter here from the Chief; I believe it explains why we're here."

"I can guess, I can guess. And none too soon. Things are in terrible shape, Terrible." Fetter ripped open the letter and glanced through it with hurried eyes.

"Right," he nodded. "I'm to help you all I can. Place myself at your disposal. What can I do?"

"Tell us what's up," I suggested.

"That would be a long story. I suppose you know something about the situation already. Several reports have gone in to Base. What did the Chief tell you, Hanson?"

Briefly, I sketched the Chief's report, Fetter nodding every few words. When I had finished, he rubbed his long, thin fingers together nervously, and stared down, frowning at the littered top of his desk.

"Right as far as he went," he said. "But he didn't go far enough. Wanted you to find out for yourself, I suppose."

"Well, there *is* a secret society working against us here. Sect, I'd call it. Undermined the whole inhabited portion of Lakos—which isn't a great area, as you know."

"The Chief Priestess is Liane. I believe you said she stowed away on the *Ertak* with you?"

I nodded.

"You're keeping her under guard?" asked Fetter.

"No; under the circumstances, we couldn't. We had no authority, you see. A crowd of natives bore her away in triumph."

"Then your work's cut out for you," groaned Fetter. "She's a devil incarnate, Beautiful, irresistible, and evil as corruption itself. If she's back, I'm afraid there's nothing to be done. We've been sitting on a volcano ever since she left. Pressure growing greater every instant, it seemed. She's just what's needed to set it off."

"We'll have to take our chances," I commented. "And now, just what is the set-up?"

"The Worshipers of the Flame, they call themselves. The membership takes in about every male being on Lakos. They meet in the great caverns which honeycomb the continent. Ghastly places; I've seen some of the smaller ones. Contluent was thrust up from the sea in a molten state, some scientific chap told me once; these caverns were made by great belches of escaping steam or gas. You'll see them."

"She—Liane—and her priests rule solely by terror. The Lakonians are naturally just horses" (a draft animal of ancient Earth, now extinct), "content to work without thinking. Liane and her crew have made them

think—just enough to be dangerous. Just what she tells them to think, and no more. Disobedient ones are punished by death. Rather a terrible death, I gather.

"Well, her chief aim is to stop the production of temite. She wishes to bargain with the Council—at her own terms."

"What's her price?" I asked. "What does she want, wealth?"

"No. *Power!*" Fetter leaned forward across the desk, hammering it with both fists to emphasize the word, his eyes gleaming from their deep sockets. "Power, Hanson, that's what she craves. She's insane on the subject. Utterly made. She lusts after it. You asked her price; it's this: a seat in the Council!"

I gasped audibly. A seat in the Council! The Council, composed of the wisest heads of the universe, and ruling the universe with absolute authority!

"She *is* mad," I said.

"Crazy," grunted Correy. "Plain crazy. A woman—in the Council!"

Fetter nodded solemnly.

"Mad—crazy—use your own terms," he said. "But that's her price. The Chief didn't tell you that, did he? Well, perhaps he didn't know. I learned it in a very roundabout way. She'll make the formal demand when the time is ripe, never fear. And what's more, unless these Worshipers of the Flame are stamped out—*she'll get what she demands!*"

"Impossible!"

"Not at all. You know what this place is. Only a Lakonian can stand this atmosphere long. No vitality to the light that does come through this damned green stuff they breathe for air; and after a few days, the acid, metallic tang of it drives you frantic. Never can get used to it.

"So the Lakonians have to mine the temite. And the universe must have temite, in quantities that can't be supplied from any other source. If the Lakonians won't mine it—and they won't, when Liane tells them to quit—what will the Council and your Service do about it?"

"Plenty," growled Correy.

"Nothing," contradicted Fetter. "You can kill a man, disintegrate him, imprison him, punish him, as you will, but you can't make him work." And there that phase of the matter rested.

I asked him a number of questions which I felt would help us to start our work properly, and he answered every one of them promptly and fully. Evidently, Fetter had given his problem a great deal of thought, and had done more than a little intelligent investigating of his own.

"If there's anything else I can do to help you," he said as he accompanied us to the door, "don't fail to call upon me. And remember what I said: trust no one except yourselves. Study each move before you make it. These Lakonians are dull witted, but they'll do whatever Liane tells them. And she thinks fast and cunningly."

We thanked him for his warning, and hurried back to the ship through the sickly-green Lakonian dusk. The acrid odor of the atmosphere was already beginning to be disagreeable.

"Decent sort of a chap, Fetter," commented Correy. "All wrought up, isn't he? Worried stiff."

"I imagine he has cause to be. And—he might have been right in saying we should have held Liane; perhaps we could have treated with her in some way."

"No chance! Not that lady. When we treat with her, we'll have to have the whip hand, utterly and completely."

The heavy outer door of the *Ertak's* exit was open, but the transparent inner door, provided for just such an emergency, was in place, forming, in conjunction with a second door, an efficient air-lock. The guard saw us coming and, as we came up, had the inner door smartly opened, standing at salute as we entered. We returned his salute and went up to the navigating room, where I proposed to hold a brief council of war, informing Kincaide and Hendricks of what we had learned from Fetter, and deciding upon a course of action for the following day. Kincaide, whom I had left on watch, was there waiting.

"Well, sir, how do things stack up?" he asked anxiously.

"Not so good. Please ask Mr. Hendricks to report here at once, and I'll give you the whole story.

Kincaide pressed the attention signal to Hendricks' room, and waited impatiently for a response. There was none.

"Try my room," suggested Correy. "Maybe he hasn't moved back to his own quarters yet."

"That's what he said he would be doing," replied Kincaide. But that signal too failed to bring any response.

Correy glanced at me, a queer, hurt expression in his eyes.

"Shall I go forward and see if he—if he's ill?" he asked quickly.

"Please do," I said, and as soon as he was gone I turned to the microphone and called the sentry on duty at the exit.

"Commander Hanson speaking. Has Mr. Hendricks left the ship?"

"Yes, sir. Some time ago. The lady came back, saying she had word from you; she and Mr. Hendricks left a few minutes later. That was all right, sir?"

"Yes," I said, barely able to force the word from between my lips. Hendricks . . . and Liane? Hendricks . . . a traitor? I cut the microphone and glanced at Kincaide. He must have read the facts in my eyes.

"He's . . . gone, sir?"

"With Liane," I nodded.

The door burst open, and Correy came raging into the room.

"He's not there, sir!" he snapped. "But in his room I found this!"

He held out an envelope, addressed to me. I ripped it open, glanced through the hasty, nervous scrawl, and then read it aloud:

"Sir:

I am leaving with Liane. I am sorry. It had to be.

Hendricks."

"That, gentlemen," I said hoarsely, after a long silence, "will make the blackest entry ever spread upon the log of the *Ertak*—upon any ship of the Service. Let us dismiss this thing from our minds, and proceed."



But that was easier, by far, to propose than to accomplish.

It was late indeed when we finished our deliberations, but the plan decided upon was exceedingly simple.

We would simply enforce our authority until we located definite resistance; we would then concentrate our efforts upon isolating the source of this resistance and overcoming it. That we would find Liane at the bottom of our difficulties, we knew perfectly well, but we desired to place her in a definite position as an enemy. So far, we had nothing against her, no proof of her activities, save the rather guarded report of the Chief, and the evidence given us by Fetter.

There were three major continents on Lakos, but only one of them was inhabited or habitable, the other two being within the large northern polar cap. The activities of The Worshipers of the Flame were centered about the chief city of Gio, Fetter had told us, and therefore we were in position to start action without delay.

Force of men would avail us nothing, since the entire crew of the *Ertak* would be but a pitiful force compared to the horde Liane could muster. Our mission could be accomplished—if, indeed, it could be accomplished at all—by the force of whatever authority our position commanded, and the outwitting of Liane.

Accordingly, it was decided that, in the emergency, all three of us would undertake the task, leaving the ship in charge of Sub-officer Scholey, chief of the operating room crew, and a very capable, level-headed man. I gave him his final instructions as we left the ship, early the next morning:

"Scholey, we are leaving you in a position of unusual responsibility. An emergency makes it necessary, or at least desirable, for Mr. Correy, Mr. Kincaide and myself to leave the ship. Mr. Hendricks has already departed; therefore, the *Ertak* will be left in your charge.

"Remain here for five days; if we do not return in that time, leave for Base, and report the circumstances there. The log will reveal full authority for your actions."

"Very well, sir!" He saluted, and we passed through the air-lock which protected the *Ertak* from the unpleasant atmosphere of Lakos, armed only with atomic pistols, and carrying condensed rations and menores at our belts.

We went directly to the largest of the mines, the natives regarding us with furtive, unfriendly eyes. A great crowd of men were lounging around the mouth of the mine, and as we approached, they tightened their ranks, as though to block our passage.

"We'll bluff it through," I whispered. "They know the uniform of the Service, and they have no leader."

"I'd like to take a swing at one of them," growled Correy. "I don't like their looks—not a bit. But just as you say, sir."

"Our bluff worked. We marched up to the packed mass as though we had not even noticed them, and slowly and unwillingly, they opened a path for us, closing in behind us with rather uncomfortable celerity. For a moment I regretted we had not taken a landing crew from the *Ertak*.

However, we won through the mouth of the mine without violence, but here a huge Lakonian who seemed to be in authority held up his hand and blocked our way.

"Let me handle him, sir," said Correy from the corner of his mouth. "I understand a little of their language."

"Right," I nodded. "Make it strong!"

Correy stepped forward, his head thrust out truculently, thumbs hooked through his belt, his right hand suggestively near his automatic pistol. He rapped out something in unpleasant gutturals, and the tall Lakonian replied volubly.

"He says it's orders," commented Correy over his shoulder. "Now I'll tell him who's giving orders around here!"

He stepped closer to the Lakonian, and spoke with emphatic briefness. The Lakonian fell back a step, hesitated, and started to reply. Correy stopped him with a single word, and motioned us to follow him. The guard watched us doubtfully, and angrily, but he let us pass.

"He told me," explained Correy, "that *she* had given orders. Didn't name her, but we can guess, all right. I told him that if she wished to say anything to us, she could do it in person; that we weren't afraid of her, of him, or all the Lakonians who ever breathed green soup and called it air. He's a simple soul, and easily impressed. So we got by."

"Nice work," I commended him. "It's an auspicious start, anyway."

The mouth of the mine was not the usual vertical shaft; as Fetter had told us, it was a great ramp, of less than forty-five degrees, leading underground, illuminated by jets of greenish flame from metal brackets set into the wall at regular intervals, and fed by a never-failing interplay of natural gas. The passageway was of varying height and width, but nowhere less than three times my height from floor to ceiling, and it was broad enough at its narrowest so that ten men might have marched easily abreast.

The floor, apparently, had been smoothed by human effort, but for the rest, the corridor was, to judge from the evidence, entirely natural, for the walls of shiny black rock bore no marks of tools.

At intervals, other passages branched off from the main one we were following, at greater and less angles, but these were much narrower, and had very apparently been hewn in the solid rock. Like the central passage, they were utterly deserted.

"We'll be coming out on the other side, pretty soon," commented Correy after a steady descent of perhaps twenty minutes. "This tunnel must go all the way through. I—what's that?"

We paused and listened. From behind us came a soft, whispering sound, the nature of which we could not determine.

"Sounds like the shuffle of many feet, far behind," suggested Kincaide gravely.

"Or, more likely, the air rushing around the corners of those smaller passages," I suggested. "This is a drafty hole. Or it may be just the combined flarings of all these jets of flame."

"Maybe you're right, sir," nodded Correy. "Anyway, we won't worry about it until we have to. I guess we just keep on going?"

"That seems to be about all there is to do; we should enter one of the big subterranean chambers Fetter mentioned, before long."

As a matter of fact, it was but a minute or two later, that we turned a curve in the corridor and found ourselves looking into a vast open space, the roof supported by huge pillars of black stone, and the floor littered with rocky debris and mining tools thrown down by workmen.

"This is where they take out the temite ore, I imagine," said Kincaide, picking up a loose fragment of rock. He pointed to a smudge of soft, crumbly gray metal, greasy in appearance, showing on the surface of the specimen he had picked up. "That's the stuff, sir, that's causing us all this trouble; nearly pure metallic temite." He dropped the fragment, looking about curiously. "But where," he added, "are the miners?"

"I'm inclined to believe we'll find out before we get back to the *Ertak*," said Correy grimly. "Everything's moved along too sweetly; trouble's just piling up somewhere."

"That remains to be seen," I commented. "Let's move on, and see what's beyond. That looks like a door of some sort, on the far side. Perhaps it will lead us to something more interesting."

"I hope it does," growled Correy. "This underground business is getting on my nerves!"

It was a door I had seen, a huge slab of light yellow-green metal. I paused, my hand on the simple latch.

"Stand to one side," I said softly. "Let's see what happens."

I lifted the latch, and the heavy door opened inward. Cautiously, I stared through the portal. Inside was blackness and silence; somewhere, in the far distance, I could see two or three tiny pin-pricks of green light.

"We'll take a look around, anyway," I said. "Follow me carefully and be ready for action. It seems all right, but somehow, I don't like the looks of things."

In single file, we passed beyond the massive door, the light from the large room outside streaming ahead of us, our shadows long and grotesque, moving on the rucky floor ahead of us.

Then, suddenly, I became aware that the path of light ahead of us was narrowing. I turned swiftly; the door must be closing!

As I turned, lights roared up all around us, intense light which struck at our eyes with almost tangible force. A great shout rose, echoing, to a vaulted ceiling. Before we could move or cry out, a score of men on either side had pinioned us.

"Damnation!" roared Correy. "If I only had the use of my fists—just for a second!"

We were in a great cavern, the largest I have ever beheld. A huge bubble, blown in the molten rock by powerful gases from the seething interior of the world.

The roof was invisible above our heads, and the floor sloped down gently in every direction, toward a central dais, so far away that its details were

lost to us. From the center of the dais a mighty pillar of green flame mounted into the air nearly twenty times the height of a man. All around the dais, seated on the sloping floor of the cavern, were Lakonians.

There were hundreds of them, thousands of them, and they were as silent and motionless as death. They paid no heed to us; they crouched, each in his place, and stared at the column of greenish flame.

"It was a trap," muttered Kincaide as our captors marched us rapidly toward the dais in the center of the huge amphitheater. "They were waiting for us; I imagine we have been watched all the time. And we walked into the trap exactly like a bunch of schoolboys."

"True—but we've found, I believe, what we wished to find," I told him. "This is the meeting place of the Worshipers of the Flame. There, I imagine is the Flame itself. And unless I'm badly mistaken, that's Liane waiting up there in the center!"

It *was* Liane. She was seated on a massive, simple throne of the greenish-yellow metal, the column of fire rising directly behind her like an impossible plume. In a semicircle at her feet, in massive chairs made of the odd metal, were perhaps twenty old men, their heads crowned with great, unkempt manes of white hair.

And standing beside Liane's throne, at her right hand, was—*Hendricks!*

His shoulders drooped, his chin rested upon his breast. He was wearing, not the blue-and-silver uniform of the Service, but a simple tunic of pale green, with buskins of dark green leather, laced with black. He did not look up as we were ushered before this impressive group, but Liane watched us with smiling interest.

Liane, seated there upon her throne, was not the Liane of those days in the *Ertak*. There, she had been scarcely more than a peculiarly fascinating young woman with a regal bearing and commanding eyes. Here, she was a goddess, terrifyingly beautiful, smiling with her lips, yet holding the power of death in the white hands which hung gracefully from the massive arms of the throne.

She wore a simple garment of thin, shimmering stuff, diaphanous as finest silk. It was black, caught at one shoulder with a flashing green stone. The other shoulder was bared, and the black garment was a perfect foil for the whiteness of her perfect skin, her amazing blue eyes, and the pale gold of her hair.

She lifted one hand in a slight gesture as our conductors paused before the dais; they fell away and formed a close cordon behind us.

"We have awaited your coming," she said in her sibilant voice, "And you are here."

"We are here," I said sternly, "representing, through our Service, the Supreme Council of the universe. What word shall we take back to those who sent us?"

Liane smiled, a slow, cruel smile. The pink fingers of one hand tapped gently on the carved arm of her throne. The eyes of the semicircle of old men watched us with unwavering hatred.

"The word you carry will be a good word," she said slowly. "Liane has

decided to be gracious—and yet it is well that you have full understanding of Liane's power. For while the word Liane shall give you to bear back is a good word, still, Liane is but a woman, and women have been known to change their minds. Is that not so, Commander Hanson?"

"That is so, Liane," I nodded. "And we are glad to hear that your wisdom has led you to be gracious."

She leaned forward suddenly, her eyes flashing with anger.

"Mark you, it is not wisdom but a whim of mine which causes me to be graciously minded!" she cried. "Think you that Liane is afraid? Look about you!"

We turned slowly and cast our eyes about that great gathering. As far as the eye could reach, in every direction, was a sea of faces. And as we looked, the door through which we had entered this great hall was flung open, and a crowd of tiny specks came surging in.

"And still they come, at Liane's command," she laughed. "They are those who played, to disarm your suspicions, at blocking your entry to this place. They did but follow you, a safe distance behind."

"I thought so," murmured Correy. "Things were going too smoothly. That was what we heard, sir."

I nodded, and looked up at Liane.

"You have many followers," I said. "Yet this is but a small world, and behind the Council are all the worlds of the universe."

Liane threw back her head and laughed, a soft, tinkling sound that rose clearly above the hollow roar of the mighty flame behind her throne.

"You speak bravely," she said, "knowing that Liane holds the upper hand. Did your Council take armed action against us, we would blow up these caverns which are the source of your precious temite, and bury it so deeply no force that could live here could extract it in the quantities in which the universe needs it.

"But enough of this exchange of sharp words. Liane has already said that she is disposed to be gracious. Does that not content you?"

"I will bear back to those who sent me whatever word you have to offer; it is not for me to judge its graciousness," I said coolly.

"Then—but first, let me show you how well I rule here," she said. She spoke to one of the old men seated at her feet; he arose and disappeared in a passage leading from directly beneath the dais.

"You will see, presently, the punishment of Liane," she said smilingly. "Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame, Mother of Life, Giver of Death, Most Worshiped of the Worshipers.

"Perhaps you wonder how it came that Liane sits here in judgment upon a whole people? Let me tell you, while we await the execution of Liane's judgment.

"The father of Liane, and his father before him, back unto those remote days of which we have no knowledge, were Chief Priests of the Worshipers of the Flame. But they were lacking in ambition, in knowledge, and in power. Their followers were but few, and their hands were held out in benediction and not in command.

"But the father of Liane had no son; instead he had a daughter, in whom was all the wisdom of those who had been the Chief Priests. She gathered about her a group of old men, shrewd and cunning, the lesser priests and those who would know the feel of power, who were not priests. You see them here at the feet of Liane.

"And under Liane's guidance, the ranks of the Worshipers grew, and as this power grew, so grew the power of Liane, until the time came when no man, no woman, on the face of Lakos, dared question the command of the Chief Priestess. And those who would have rebelled, were made to feel the power of Liane—as these you see here now."

The old man had reappeared, and behind him were two miserable wretches, closely guarded by a dozen armed men. Liane spoke briefly to the old man, and then turned to us.

"The first of these is one who has dared to disobey," she explained. "He brought out more of the ore than Liane had ordered. Do you hear the multitude? They know already what his fate will be."

A long, shuddering whisper had arisen from the thousands of beings crouched there in the amphitheater, as the uncouth figure of the prisoner was led up a flight of steep, narrow steps to the very base of the flame.

Hendricks, still hiding his face from us, bent over Liane and whispered something in her ear; she caressed his arm softly, and shook her head. Hendricks leaned more heavily against the throne, shuddering.

Slowly, the flame was dying, until we could see that it was not a solid pillar of fire, but a hollow circle of flame, fed by innumerable jets set at the base of a circle of trifle more than the length of a man across.

Into those deadly circles the condemned man was led. His legs were bound swiftly, so that he could not move, and the old man stepped back quickly.

As though his movement had been a signal, the flames shot up with a roar, until they lost themselves far over our heads. As one man, the three of us started forward, but the guards hemmed us in instantly.

"Fools!" cried Liane. "Be still! The power of Liane is absolute here."

We stared, fascinated, at the terrible sight. The flame spouted, streaks of blue and yellow streaking up from its base. Mercifully, we could not see within that encircling wall of fire.

Slowly, the flame died down again. A trap-door opened in the circle, and some formless thing dropped out of sight. Liane questioned the old man again, her eyes resting upon the other prisoner. The old man answered briefly.

"This one spoke against the power of Liane," she explained smilingly, "He said Liane was cruel; that she was selfish. He also must feel the embrace of the sacred Flame."

I heard, rather than saw, the ghastly drama repeated, for I had bent my head, and would not look up. Liane was no woman; she was a fiend. And yet for her a trusted officer, a friend, had forsworn his service and his comrades. I wondered, as I stood there with bowed head, what were the thoughts which must have been passing through Hendricks' mind.

"You fear to look upon the punishment of Liane?" the voice of the unholy priestess broke in upon my shuddering reverie. "Then you understand why her power is absolute; why she is Mother of Life, and Giver of Death, throughout all Lakos. And now for the word I promised you, a gracious word from one who could be terrible and not gracious, were that her whim."

"It has been in the mind of Liane to extend her power, to make for herself a place in this Supreme Council of which you speak with so much awe and reverence, Commander Hanson. But by happenchance, another whim has seized her."

Liane looked up at Hendricks, smilingly, and took one of his hands in hers. It was wonderful how her face softened as he returned, fiercely, the pressure of her soft hands.

"I know it will sound strange to your ears," she said in a voice almost tender, "but Liane is, after all, a woman, with many, if not all, a woman's many weaknesses. And while even in his presence Liane will say that her lover was at the beginning looked upon as no more than a tool which might further Liane's power, he has won now a place in her heart."

I saw Hendricks tremble as she admitted her love, and that portion of his face which we could see flushed hotly.

"And so, Liane has elected to give up, at least for the present, the place in the Council which she could command. For after all, that would be a remote power, lacking in the elements of physical power which Liane has over these, her people, and in which she has learned to delight.

"So, Commander Hanson, bear to your superiors this word: Liane will permit a production of whatever reasonable amount of temite is desired. She will remain here with her consort, brooking no interference, no changes, no commands from any person or organization. Go, now, and take with you the words of Liane!"

I looked up at her gravely, and shook my head.

"We shall go," I said, "and we shall take with us your words. But I warn you that the words you have spoken are treason to the universe, in that you have defied the Council!"

Liane leaped from her throne, her scarlet lips drawn back against her white and gleaming teeth. Her eyes, dilated with anger, blazed down upon us almost as hotly as the flame which rose behind her.

"Go! And quickly!" she fairly screamed. "If you have no desire to feel the embrace of the sacred Flame, then go!"

I bowed silently, and motioned Correy and Kincaide. Swiftly, we made our way down a long aisle, surrounded by motionless figures staring unblinkingly at the column of fire, toward the door by which we had entered this great chamber.

Behind us, I could hear Liane's clear voice lifted in her own guttural language, as she addressed the multitude.

Safely within the *Ertak*, we discussed the morning's adventure over a late luncheon.

"I suppose," said Kincaide, "there's nothing left to do but tell Fetter as

much as seems wise, to reassure him, and then return to Base to make our report."

"We'll come back, if we do," growled Correy. "And we'll come back to fight. The Council won't stand for her attitude."

"Undoubtedly that's true," I admitted. "Still, I believe we should put it up to Base, and through Base to the Council, before doing anything more. Much, if not all, of what she said was perfectly true."

"It was that," nodded Kincaide. "There were scores, if not hundreds of doors leading into that big chamber; I imagine it can be reached, underground, from any point on the continent. And those winding passages would be simple to defend from any form of invasion."

"But could these Lakonians fight?" asked Correy. "That's what I'd like to know. I doubt it. They look like a sleepy, ignorant lot."

"I think they'd fight, to the death, if Liane ordered them to," I replied thoughtfully. "Did you notice the way they stared at the flame, never moving, never even winking? My idea is that it exercises a sort of auto-hypnotic influence over them, which gives Liane just the right opportunity to impress her will upon them."

"I wondered about that," Kincaide commented. "I believe you're right, sir. Any idea as to when we'll shove off?"

"There's no particular hurry; Fetter will be busy until evening, I imagine, so we won't bother him until then. As soon as we've had a chat with him, we can start."

"And without Hendricks," said Kincaide, shaking his head sadly. "I wonder—"

"If you don't mind, Mr. Kincaide, we won't mention his name on the *Ertak* after this," I interrupted. "I, for one, would rather forget him. Wouldn't you?"

"I would, sir, if I could," said Kincaide softly. "But that's not easy, is it?"

It wasn't easy. As a matter of fact, it was impossible. I knew I would never forget my picture of him, standing there shaken and miserable, beside the woman for whom he had disgraced his uniform, hiding his head in shame from the eyes of the men he had called comrades, and who had called him friend. But to talk of him was morbid.

It was late in the afternoon when I called Correy and Kincaide to the navigating room, where I had spent several hours charting our return course.

"I believe, gentlemen," I remarked, "that we can call on Mr. Fetter now. I'll ask you to remain in charge of the ship, Mr. Kincaide, while Mr. Correy and I—"

An attention signal sounded sharply to interrupt me. I answered it instantly.

"Sentry at exit, sir," said an excited voice. "Mr. Hendricks and the woman stowaway are here asking for you. They say it is very urgent."

"Bring them both here at once, under guard," I ordered. "Be sure you are properly relieved."

"Right, sir!"



I turned to Correy and Kincaide, who were watching me with curious eyes. My excitement must have shown upon my face.

"Mr. Hendricks and Liane are at the exit, asking to see me." I snapped. "They'll be here in a moment. What do you suppose is in the air?"

"Hendricks?" muttered Correy, his face darkening. "It seems to me he has a lot of nerve to—"

There was a sharp tap on the door.

"Come!" I ordered quickly. The door opened and Liane, followed by Hendricks, hurried into the room.

"That will do," I nodded to the guard who had accompanied them. "You may go."

"You wonder why we're here, I suppose?" demanded Liane. I'll tell you, quickly, for every instant is precious."

This was a very different Liane. She was no longer clad in diaphanous black; she was wearing a tunic similar to the one she had worn on board the *Ertak*, save that this one was torn and soiled. Her lips, as she talked, twitched with an insane anger; her amazing eyes were like those of a cornered beast of the wilderness.

"My council of wise old men turned against me when I told them my plans to marry the man of my choice. They said he was an outsider, an enemy, a foreigner. They would have none of him. They demanded that I give him to the Flame, and marry one of my own kind. They had not, of course, understood what I had said to you there in the great chapel of the Flame.

"I defied them. We escaped through a passage which is not known to any save myself, and the existence of which my father taught me years ago. We are here, but they will guess where we have gone. My old men are exciting my people against me—and for that shall all, down to the last one, know the embrace of the Flame!" She gritted her teeth on the words, her nostrils distended with rage.

"I—I am safe. I can command them; I can make them know my power, and I shall. The Flame will have much to feed upon in the days which are to come, I promise you. But my beloved would not be safe; at this moment I cannot protect him. So I have brought him back. I—I know he . . . but I will not be weak. I am Liane!"

She faced Hendricks, who had stood there like a graven image, watching her. Her arms went about his neck; her lips sought his.

"My beloved!" she whispered. "Liane was but a woman, after all. Darling! Good-by!" She kissed him again, and hurried to the door.

"One more thing!" she cried. "I must master them myself. I must show them I—I, Liane—am ruler here. You promise? You promise me you will not interfere; that you will do nothing?"

"But—"

Liane interrupted me before I could put my objections into words.

"Promise!" she commanded. "There are hundreds, thousands of them! You cannot slay them all—and if you did, there would be more. I can bend

them to my will; they know my power. Promise, or there will be many deaths upon your hands."

"I promise," I said.

"And you—all of you?" she demanded, sweeping Correy and Kincaide with her eyes.

"Commander Hanson speaks for us all," nodded Kincaide.

With a last glance at Hendricks, whose eyes had never left her for an instant, she was gone.

Hendricks uttered a long, quivering sigh. His face, as he turned to us, was ghastly white.

"She's gone," he muttered. "Forever."

"That's exceedingly unfortunate, sir, for you," I replied crisply. "As soon as it's perfectly safe, we'll see to it that you depart also."

The sting of my words apparently did not touch him.

"You don't understand," he said dully. I know what you think, and I do not blame you. She came back; you know that.

"'You are coming with me,' she said. 'I care for you. I want you. You are coming with me, at once.' I told her I was not; that I loved her, but that I could not, would not, go.

"She opened a port and showed me one of her countrymen, standing not far away, watching the ship. He held something in his hand.

"'He has one of your hand bombs,' she told me. 'I found it while I was hidden, and took it with me when I left. If you do not come with me, he will throw it against the ship, destroy it, and those within it.'

"There was nothing else for me to do. She permitted me to explain no more than I did in the note I left. I pleaded with her; did all I could. Finally I persuaded her to give you the word she did, there before the great flame.

"She brought me back here at the risk of her own life, and, what is even more precious to her, her power. In—in her own way, she loves me. . . ."

It was an amazing story; a second or two passed before any of us could speak. And then words came, fast and joyous; our friend, our trusted fellow-officer had come back to us! I felt as though a great black cloud had slid from across the sun.

And then, above our voices, rose a great mutter of sound. We glanced at one another, wonderingly. Hendricks was the first to make a move.

"That's the mob!" he said, darting toward the door. We followed him swiftly to the exit of the ship, through the air-lock, out into the open.

Hendricks had spoken the truth. Liane was walking, very slowly and deliberately, her head flung back proudly, toward the city. Coming toward her, like a great ragged wave, was a mighty mass of humanity, led by capering old men—undoubtedly the lesser priests, who had turned against her.

"The portable projectors, sir!" begged Correy excitedly. "A pair of them, and that mob—"

"We're bound by our promise," I reminded him. "She's not afraid; her power is terrible. I believe she'll win without them. Look!"

Liane had paused. She lifted one hand in a gesture of command, and

called out to the rabble. Correy translated the whole thing for me later.

"Halt!" she cried sharply. "Who moves upon the Chief Priestess of the Flame earns the embrace of the Flame!"

The crowd halted, cowering; then the old men shouted to them and gestured them onward. With a rush, the front ranks came on.

"Sol!" Liane called out to them. "You would disobey Liane? Yet even yet it is not too late; Liane gives you one chance more. You little know the Chief Priestess of the Flame if you think she will tolerate an encroachment of her power. Back! Back, I say, or you all shall feel the might of Liane!"

Before her tirade the mob faltered, but again the crazed old men led them on.

Liane turned, saw us, and made a regal gesture of farewell. From the bosom of her tunic she snatched a small black object, and swung it high above her head.

"The bomb!" shouted Hendricks. "She has it; she—"

At the very feet of the onrushing crowd the black object struck. There was a hollow roar; a blast of thundering air swept us backward to the ground.

When we scrambled to our feet, Liane was gone. The relentless mob had gone. Where they had been was a great crater of raw earth, strewn with ghastly fragments. Far back toward the city a few straggling figures ran frantically away from that scene of death.

"Gone!" I said. "Power was a mania, an obsession with her. Even her death was a supreme gesture—of power, of authority."

"Liane," Hendricks whispered. "Chief Priestess of the Flame. . . . Giver of Death. . . ."

With Liane gone, and with her the old men who had tried to snatch her power from her hand, and who might have caused us trouble, the rebellion of the Lakonians was at an end.

Leaderless, they were helpless, and I believe they were happy in the change. Sometimes the old ways are better than the new, and Liane's régime had been merciless and rather terrible.

There are many kinds of women: great women, and women with small souls; women filled with the spirit of sacrifice; selfish women, good women and bad.

And Liane? I leave her for you to judge. She was a woman; classify her for yourself.

After all, I am an old man, and perhaps I have forgotten the ways of women. I do not wish to judge, on one hand to be called bitter and hard, on the other hand to be condemned as soft with advancing age.

I have given you the story of Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame.

How, you clever and infallible members of this present generation, do you judge her?

# The Whisperers

by Donald Wandrei

*We are so preoccupied today with man-made troubles that we tend to forget that the greatest scourges of history have not been acts of man but acts of nature. Crop failures, floods, and earthquakes have accounted for greater numbers than bombs and bayonets, but greatest by far have been plagues. The human race has a habit of forgetting these things. We prefer to devote our history books mainly to the disasters of our own making, relegating the devastations of the Black Plague and its kin to short paragraphs. In spite of modern developments, there is nothing at all impossible about future visitations of that sort. In Donald Wandrei's story you may be reminded of what it must have felt to have lived in such periods . . . and his denouement is startling.*

IT IS doubtful whether anything in the annals of medicine or the history of mankind made a deeper impression than "The Whisperers," though there may have been deadlier diseases or more repulsive scourges in the far past. Great plagues swept Europe in the Middle Ages and depopulated whole countries. They ran their virulent course through months or years, claimed millions of lives, and left an indelible memory in such writings as Defoe's "Journal of the Plague Year" and Boccaccio's introduction to the "Decameron."

Bubonic plague, yellow fever, malaria, typhus, and other epidemic diseases have raced with a fury more destructive than war through the Far East and the tropics, through civilized peoples and savages, during ancient times and modern. Appalling though these pestilences were, they lacked the peculiarly frightening quality that distinguished The Whisperers.

In the fabulous years of Atlantis, or the prehistoric existence of Mu, it is possible that some now-forgotten malady imperiled the race. It is even possible that in the dawn of time, the priests of Lemuria, in an effort to preserve their continent from impending doom, consulted the Archaontic Symbols, those mysterious petroglyphs which are said to have summarized all conceivable life forms.

It is within the limits of credence that some weird fate may have overwhelmed Mayan culture, or brought oblivion to the race whose existence is known only by the sculptures on Easter Island. But history affords no parallel to The Whisperers; and neither history nor legend presents more than the vague speculation that any affliction as strange as The Whisperers ever before entered human life.

Historians writing in this, the Twenty-first Century, can recall the ap-

pearance of The Whisperers with greater understanding but no less alarm than the general public. The scientists of the Twentieth Century had made vast strides toward extending the boundaries of knowledge, and toward solving the ultimate secrets of space, matter, and life. Their theoretical and experimental work was disseminated through the press, but doubtless received less attention than sensational murders or economic conditions. Scientists were prepared to investigate, analyze, and combat the mystery of The Whisperers; but in this case, the explanation caused as much alarm as The Whisperers themselves.

Not that we know the whole truth yet. Parts are still missing. But it is a probability that we may some day know more about the nature and origin of The Whisperers, for the outposts of knowledge are constantly being pushed farther, and the cosmos made to yield up one by one its deeper riddles. In the absence of complete data, however, we can only speculate as to the truth, while accepting the best explanation that scientists have advanced.

The first item concerning The Whisperers to be published was a short news dispatch sent out by the Soviet government from Moscow. The item was not used by the majority of newspapers in Europe and America. Those that did print it treated it either as a curiosity or an inside filler.

Moscow, April 2—Villagers of Kutsk, a trading post in northern Siberia, recently witnessed the fall of a glowing object from the sky, according to delayed reports which have just reached civilization. Investigation disclosed the object on the outskirts of the village in a small area of newly melted snow and ice. The object proved to be an ovoid of greenish metal a foot long and shaped somewhat like a toy Zeppelin.

Unable to find an opening, but discovering by tapping that it was hollow, the villagers smashed the object. This is said to have been done with great difficulty owing to the toughness of the peculiar metal. The inside was completely filled with a jellylike substance. Most of this was iridescent and evil-smelling, but part was reddish-gray and odorless. Government chemists will analyze the substance in an effort to determine whether foreign powers or reactionary interests within the party have been experimenting with new war devices.

The item was followed a day later by an additional bulletin which, though briefer, received wider publication.

Moscow, April 3—The small metal object that was yesterday reported to have fallen in Kutsk, Siberia, is the source of a further mystery according to word now received. The reddish-gray substance that filled part of the object is said to make a low sound which is barely within the range of audibility. The smashed container and contents are now on the way to Moscow for chemical analysis.

In the early days of the Soviet regime, even such scant information as this would have been rigidly censored. Fortunately for civilization, time and experience had modified many of the Soviet's principles. In the Twenty-first Century, her scientists gave close cooperation to scientists in other lands,

and news of all kinds, including unfavorable reports, was issued as rapidly as available.

The third bulletin, issued two days later, won fairly general publication, but rather for its oddity than for any disturbing quality it contained.

Moscow, April 4—A medical mystery has just been reported in Kutsik, the Siberian village where a strange metal object was recently found. One of the villagers, Serge Aleghileff, by an odd coincidence the very man who found the object, has been stricken by fever. His body gives off a low, murmuring sound that is distinctly audible. Observers declare the sound to have no connection with his vocal cords, and that trickery is impossible.

The villagers regard M. Aleghileff as having supernatural powers. They put up a strenuous resistance when an airplane was sent from Zelingrad, the nearest town with facilities, to take the man to the hospital there.

Physicians here are much interested in the case. M. Vilanov, commissar of public health, states that he has never heard of a similar case and believes it to be unique in medical history.

The next bulletin again resorted to brevity, and simply stated that the metal object and contents reached Moscow by airplane, but that the jellylike substance, contrary to earlier reports, was of a uniformly iridescent and malodorous nature. None of the stuff had a reddish-gray color. It was not disclosed whether some of the material had been lost in transit, whether the first report was inaccurate, or whether exposure to air had reduced it to a single state.

A separate paragraph declared that Aleghileff had reached Zelingrad, and that hospital attachés were mystified by the symptoms of his illness. No explanation had yet been advanced for the whispering sound that emanated from his flesh.

The reports that really made the headlines and began to attract widespread attention was the following announcement:

Moscow, April 8—The U.S.S.R. today declared a state of extreme emergency to exist in the Siberian village of Kutsik and summarily executed the entire population of 230 men, women, and children. This drastic step was taken for the benefit of the public and only after careful investigation. No visitors are allowed to approach within ten kilometers of the village, under penalty of instant execution by the rules of martial law.

A total of 64 other individuals have been seized in Zelingrad and Moscow and placed in absolute isolation under military guard.

The reasons given for these extraordinary measures are based on the finding of a small metal object shaped like a projectile near Kutsik several days ago. The object was taken to Zelingrad and transhipped to Moscow. A second airplane departed for Kutsik and flew back with Serge Aleghileff for hospitalization. M. Aleghileff had contracted a hitherto unknown fever that caused his entire body to give off a murmuring sound. The aviator who flew the victim to Zelingrad reported that every individual in Kutsik emitted the same puzzling sibilance, and that hysteria had seized the populace.

Aleghileff was admitted to the hospital at Zelingrad but died within a

few hours. Until the end, his body was the source of a singular rustling sound not unlike the movement of a swarm of maggots, but without visible cause. At death, his body rapidly passed from the fever flush which had reddened it and changed to an iridescent play of colors accompanied by a foul odor before putrefaction had begun. The whispering sound persisted but gradually became fainter and was no longer audible several hours after death.

A scouting plane, instantly ordered to Kutsik, sent a radio report that the streets of the village were strewn with dead, and that the remainder of the population suffered from the whispering fever. As a matter of public welfare, airplanes loaded with lethal gases were immediately dispatched to the scene. The epidemic is considered more remarkable because of the bitter cold weather, temperatures of 40 to 60 degrees below zero having prevailed in the district for the past week.

Aleghileff was the first person to find, handle, and open the metal object that fell on the outskirts of the village. Authorities are convinced that a definite connection exists between the object and the outbreak of the malady. This view is supported by the fact that several nurses, internes, and surgeons at the Zelingrad Hospital who treated the patient have developed both the fever and the whispering. \*

A general order was then issued for the military police to detain and isolate but avoid contact with all persons who had any direct or indirect part whatsoever in the handling of the metal object or of Aleghileff.

Public health and military officials are cooperating to control the situation. Grave suspicion is entertained that disease microbes of a new malignant kind were deliberately loosed by a foreign power, and that only an accident caused the carrier to fall in a sparsely populated area.

All workers are requested to keep a vigilant watch for additional projectiles, but to avoid direct contact with any that may be found, and to report them immediately.

Meanwhile, the intelligence division of the military police has been given the sterilized container for inspection to determine its workmanship and origin. Metallurgic chemists and other technical experts have also been detailed to analyze the metal.

M. Vilanov, in a preliminary report before his detention and isolation, declared that he had found no trace of bacteria in the iridescent substance. He advanced the theory that it may be a toxic poison capable of being absorbed through the skin and of creating further body toxins communicable to other persons through skin contact.

Thus far, the exact nature of the substance is unknown, and the parts of the greenish container have puzzled experts. It is expected that further analysis will disclose the unidentified metal to be an alloy of the tungsten-chromium-cobalt group.

There is no cause for alarm and the U.S.S.R. announces that the situation is well in hand. The prompt measures taken effectively checked the outbreak. The general warning was issued purely as a precautionary

measure, to facilitate the swift destruction of any further projectiles that may be found.

Subsequent developments made the last paragraph seem ironic. From then on, the dispatches were longer and more ominous. Day by day, the headlines grew in prominence and larger space was devoted to The Whisperers. They passed from a filler to a "must," advanced from inside columns to a front-page box, expanded from a box to a half column, rose to a number three and a number two head, earned a seven-column streamer, crowded more and more other news off the front page.

The Whisperers reduced flood and legislation, national and local events to insignificance. They made the records of murder trials dull reading. They sent practically all other news into the wastebasket. In six days, The Whisperers leaped from oblivion to the international limelight. In ten days, they advanced from single-deck to four-deck streamers on even the most conservative papers. They were news. They were the only news that mattered.

Through the entire duration of The Whisperers, two brilliant young American scientists played a leading part. These two men have since become famous, but at the time they were comparatively obscure. Dr. A. E. Chard at thirty was already achieving notice in medical circles as an outstanding diagnostician with a specialized interest in infectious diseases. Warren E. Langley, Sc.D., at thirty-five was drawing a fat salary from the Optical Instrument Supply Co. for research work in the field of photomicrography.

These two men were intimately connected with the history of The Whisperers, but worked behind the scenes in their own quiet way. Their names were seldom mentioned and did not make the headlines until the latter phases of the epidemic.

By that time so many theories had been offered, so many remedies suggested, so many accredited scientists fallen by the wayside along with the usual number of cranks and quacks that the proposals of Langley and Chard, while welcomed as any ray of light was, met with a considerable degree of skepticism.

The two scientists obtained their first association with The Whisperers when Chard walked into the O.I.S. Co.'s laboratories late on the afternoon of April 6th to see Langley. They had known each other for a number of years and saw each other frequently. A close friendship had developed because each had a vital interest in the other's field. Chard was attempting to isolate and classify the filterable viruses, those bacteria so tiny that they pass through the finest porcelain filters. Most of all, Chard hoped that someone would perfect the equipment to see and photograph the viruses. Langley was exactly the man, for Langley was experimenting with lenses and methods for ever higher magnifications.

The physician found Langley tinkering with a hopelessly elaborate mechanism of slides, focal beams, interferometers, interference refractometers, coils, amplifiers, prisms, projection beams, microspectroscopes, micro-metric electrical devices, and other parts.

The physicist glanced up. "Hello, Chard, what's the news?"



"Not much, except that they've captured a whispering man somewhere in Russia."

"A whispering man? What's news about that?"

Chard shrugged. "He's supposed to have a fever that makes his body give off a whispering sound, but it's probably just some reporter's imagination getting the best of him. What's new in super-photomicrography?"

Langley frowned wearily. "Very little, if anything. We haven't been able to obtain magnifications of much more than 10,000 diameters."

"And how high will you have to go to make filterable viruses visible?"

"At least 1,000,000, if not more," Langley replied. "It will be no small feat to accomplish. If we could raise the power to 1,000,000, we might be able to get at the heart of the riddles of energy and matter. We might even see what an electron looks like, or the point at which energy becomes matter. We could open up new worlds that are scarcely dreamed of. The trouble is that when magnification exceeds 10,000 diameters, the true image acquires such distortions from atmospheric interference and from the limitations of optical instruments as to be worthless for serious study. I don't think that lenses alone will ever solve the problem."

Chard looked at the complicated mechanism beside Langley. "How will it be solved?"

"I don't know yet, but possibly by the use of microscopic photo-electric cells and the conversion of one form of energy into another form. Sound can be converted into electric impulses and reconverted into sound as in the telephone, and then amplified to almost any degree. There is no theoretical reason why the same process couldn't be used on micro-organisms.

"What I am trying to do is to reflect an infinitesimal beam of light from a micro-organism, thus throwing its image on a minute photo-electric cell of extremely delicate sensitivity. The various light values of the image will then be converted to electric values of micromillimetric intensity, whose current probably won't exceed .000000001 to .000001 of an ampere.

"The next step will be the amplification of this current and then reversion of the electric values to light values directly upon a photoscreen or projected upon the ordinary cloth screen. It's a terrifically difficult problem all in all, because the measurements are so microscopic and the conversions must be absolutely accurate, without loss or distortion."

Langley, if anything, understated the difficulties of the problem. For a few minutes, Chard silently watched the other man tinker with his invention before continuing on his way. Langley by then was so absorbed in the complex creation that he did not notice Chard's departure.

The doctor had put in a hard afternoon's work at a free clinic, but he toiled till late at night on his researches into the realm of the filterable viruses. Chard had no more conception of what one of these submicroscopic organisms looked like than any one else did. He could, however, pursue certain lines of investigation with practical results.

Experimentation with drugs and chemicals, toxins and antitoxins, frequently led to valuable discoveries in controlling or counteracting the ravages of filterable viruses. Such successes did not in the least satisfy him. He never

would be satisfied until he could see and describe one of these micro-organisms, and until he could watch them in the midst of their deadly work.

To most people, the coming of The Whisperers was a catastrophe of such unparalleled importance that it drove every other thought from their minds. To Chard and Langley, among a mere handful of men throughout the world, The Whisperers served as a tremendous stimulus to the activity which they were already pursuing.

The confident prediction of the Soviet government had been premature. It was being tragically refuted at the very instant that it flashed to other parts of the globe. The Whisperers had not been halted. Isolation had proved a failure. In one respect, the fears of the government proved correct: every individual who had been isolated contracted the whispering fever. But so did countless individuals who had been in the vicinity of the sufferers. And not only the prisoners, but their guards, and the military police who had made the arrests and friends or unwary strangers, walked to the accompaniment of an appalling whisper within a day.

On April 8th, 64 new cases developed, chiefly in Moscow and Zelingrad. These victims were detained as a precautionary measure. On April 9th, over 600 additional cases made their appearance in Moscow alone. On April 10th, the number leaped to more than 10,000, with new cases developing in such vast numbers that hospitals, physicians, and undertakers were swamped. By April 11th there were 300,000 patients in Moscow, and there was no longer any attempt to bury the dead. They littered the streets, and were left there, for evacuation of the capital had been going on for two days by the terror-driven populace, and the universal thought was flight from this dreadful scourge.

The inconceivable rapidity with which the malady spread and the terrifying whisper that marked its inception were but two of the factors that created panic. The main characteristics were the fever, followed by a prickling sensation over the entire body, then a gradual feeling of drowsiness, then the end, suddenly and without warning. The malady ran its course in two days or less.

Doctors were helpless to combat it because they caught it and died before they had an opportunity to analyze blood specimens. Extraordinary hemorrhages accompanied death—hemorrhages of the brain, the internal organs, the arterial system, as if the lining of every cell and the walls of every gland, organ, and artery suddenly dissolved. Death seem horrible because of the lovely colors that rippled in iridescent mockery over the skins of the corpses.

To the living, the most horrible aspect of The Whisperers was the low, murmurous sound that marked the incubation of the plague. That sound, like the voice of death, as if the maggots were already swarming in the flesh that was soon to be theirs, drove hundreds of patients to suicide and brought raving madness to others. There was no escape from it. It sounded from homes and clung like an invisible presence to crowds. It filled the air with a monotonous and mournful sound.

By airplane and stratoplane, by car, train, hut, or any other available vehicle, the refugees streamed from the city. They poured out in all stages

of dress, abandoning houses and property, deserting machines, work, everything in the urgency of departure. The situation had got utterly beyond control, as the government admitted in its early frantic appeals for assistance. After the first few days, however, there was no government left. The officials had precipitately scattered to all points of the compass.

The main response of neighboring nations was a vain effort to close their frontiers as if that desperate action would miraculously halt the progress of the plague. The thunder of guns sounded from the Black Sea to the Baltic, and airplanes and stratoplanes flamed from the skies like showers from exploding rockets. The staccato of machine guns and the crackle of electric barrages roared along the frontiers. The dead accumulated in heaps until ammunition ran out, and still the refugees swarmed on by land and sea and sky. The laws of chance alone would have enabled a few lucky stragglers to penetrate the deadliest barriers ever devised by man in years of preparation. Here there had been no time for careful planning; and while the speed of modern communication permitted swift, concentrated mobilization, that same speed broadcast the messengers of death.

Perhaps if the projectile had fallen in the old days on the spot where it was found, if it had fallen in the Nineteenth Century, it might have wiped out Kutsk and spread no farther. Kutsk was more than three hundred miles from Zelingrad. But the projectile fell in the Twenty-first Century, and the marvelous speed of modern communication that every one praised was the real menace which gave the apparent menace of the whispering fever a pyramiding and accelerating velocity.

The pilot who brought Aleghileff to Zelingrad had chatted with fellow pilots at the landing field. He was one of the 64 persons detained, but during his isolation, those fellow pilots of the Siberian air lines were winging their way to the Far East, and southward to India, and westward to Moscow, and toward many points of the compass.

When the Soviet government issued its first warning, superstitious Chinese were fleeing from a merchant through whose body devils had begun to speak in Hankow. While the acrid fumes of burned powder were accompanying thunderous, earth-shaking explosions and the slaughter of refugees along the Russian border, the excitable citizens of Paris were listening in puzzled silence to a man seated at a sidewalk café whose body gave off a curious vibration like the hum of distant conversation.

More disastrous than any war ever fought, more deadly than any pestilence of history, instantly contagious and sweeping with a speed that paced the word of their coming, The Whisperers advanced. Contact with a victim seemed unnecessary to contract the fever. Mere presence in his general vicinity appeared to be all that was required. Then the progress was mathematical. A dozen friends or chance observers caught the plague from the original victim. Each of that dozen, before the whispering became audible, and frequently before he was aware that the dread scourge lodged within him, passed it on to a dozen others. And still no one knew the nature of The Whisperers, or the cause of that mysterious whispering, or how it could spread with such terrifying rapidity.

During the most virulent and malignant phase of previous pestilences, when they raged at their worst, there was always a percentage of people who proved immune to the disease or who survived its effects. There had been no such exceptions in the case of the whispering fever.

No one proved immune. Not a single victim had recovered. Its incubation and development proceed invariably from fever to death within two days of inception. By April 14th, it was estimated that the dead numbered upwards of 3,000,000 in Russia alone, with the number of cases anybody's guess at from one tenth to nine tenths of the total population. The staggering toll of the dead, unwatched and unburied, lying where they had fallen in streets, homes, buildings, cars, stores, and conveyances, gave off no longer the murmurous whisper but now the intolerable stench of decay. The only reason that diphtheria, typhus, tetanus, and other epidemic diseases did not rage unchecked was that The Whisperers left nothing but corpses in their wake.

Bulletins had stopped coming from Moscow or anywhere else in the U.S.S.R. by April 14th, but newspapers in other countries dismissed the lack simply by printing the fact that news had stopped coming from Russia.

By April 14th, the exodus from Paris had begun, the evacuation of Hankow and Shanghai and Tokyo had started, the desertion of every large capital and every spot where The Whisperers made their appearance. Humanity was attempting the impossible feat of running away from itself. The same scenes of flight, the same fierce scramble for exodus, the same terrible swiftness of contagion, the same pyramiding of cases in mathematically progressive leaps, the same increase of the abandoned dead in buildings and streets was occurring in so many places and countries on so rapidly expanding a scale that the magnitude of the catastrophe dwarfed its localized appearance.

As a result of geographic position, the two Americas and Australia had thus far reported no instance of the fever. Australian authorities were unaware that their bomb carriers and pursuit planes had not reached the lonely north coast until after several air transports of Japanese had flown across the wilderness and landed at various points. A majority of the fugitives were detected and killed, but the damage had been done. •

The case for survival far outweighed the humanitarian appeal. The Americas declared an absolute blockade. No ships arrived after the middle of April, because crews and passengers died before they had half completed the voyage. The derelicts drifted at the whim of the wind and water in the middle of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. But plane after plane was shot down, and for a while it was believed that the mobility, quality, and quantity of American defense armaments might enable the continents to escape; but the same speed of modern communication which had proved a curse to Europe and Asia brought The Whisperers to America by way of a strato-plane that eluded watchers and landed in New Jersey. The passengers deemed themselves to have escaped the whispering fever, but shortly after landing, several of them began to run temperatures, and in a matter of hours the fatal whispering, like the rustle of swarms of maggots, but without visible agency or known source, made itself heard.

While the whispering fever raged on through those hideous days of April, two tired, unshaved, and half-starved scientists worked incessantly, ate briefly, slept little, and kept on working in the laboratory of the O.I.S. Co. They lived there, worked there, slept there, and begrudged even their allotted four hours of sleep per day. The moment the gravity of the whispering fever became apparent, Chard had joined forces with Langley. Since it was easier to transport the tools and supplies of medicine than budge Langley's complex invention, most of the drugs and chemicals known to science now filled a large part of the laboratory. The goals of Langley and Chard had achieved world importance. They got what they wanted for the asking.

Langley made minute adjustments of his photo-micrographic magnifying apparatus. He watched tensely as blurry, unrecognizable images swam across the photoscreen. He slumped in nervous fatigue. "Another failure," he muttered. "What's the latest news?"

Chard said, "I dropped down to the front office television set a few minutes ago. There's a report that a stratoplane got through the blockade and landed somewhere in Jersey."

Langley was already making minute new changes in his invention. "That gives us only two or three days more, if the report is true. How are you making out?"

"I won't know until your invention works. So far, no one has recovered from or proved immune to the whispering fever. It was sheer suicide on the part of physicians who tried to study it first-hand. All I can do is get everything ready in case the high magnification materializes. There won't be time to consider antitoxins. If a cure or check can't be found in drugs, history ends in about a week."

Langley focused an invisible beam on an invisible organism, whose existences were registered and controlled solely by micrometric precision instruments. "Who do you suppose ever started this infernal thing? Some crazy scientist? Or some nation that decided to wipe out its enemies?"

Chard shook his head. "Tommyrot. If any scientist created the whispering fever, he would have been dead before he knew what he had done. No nation would have used the plague unless it had an impregnable defense. The plague has struck everywhere. No one on earth had a part in launching it, except accidentally."

"Isn't that a rather extreme statement? I know that new diseases have appeared from time to time in the past, and that a theory was long ago advanced that bacteria may have survived interstellar cold and drifted to earth from other regions of space. I know it's been suggested that life may have originated in such a fashion. But the source of the plague was a projectile. Are you implying that inhabitants of another planet deliberately sent the projectile here with the notion of destroying human life before they took over the globe?"

"Hardly. It's a remote possibility but highly implausible."

Langley returned to his calculations. Where the projectile originated didn't matter. Time was precious, and the hours slipped by faster than he

cared to think about. Only a matter of days remained, perhaps less time still if the plague had truly reached across the Atlantic.

Constantly he was on the verge of success, but it always eluded him. He had magnification now, stupendous magnifications of 100,000,000 to 500,000,000 diameters, but the images were badly distorted and meaningless. He must find a way of correcting the image, of throwing it into clear focus. He went over and over the delicate parts of the mechanism, making microscopic adjustments, working against time and fatigue, seeking the one micromillimetric correction that would give clear definition to the image.

The afternoon passed, brought nothing but failure. Toward evening, Chard hurried out for a breath of fresh air and for sandwiches. He almost collided with a running stranger as he emerged from the building. "What's the hurry?" he demanded.

The stranger gasped, "The plague's here! A chap just broke out with it on Fourteenth Street! I heard the whisper." The white-faced stranger raced on his way.

Chard felt depressed when he returned to the laboratory. Unless they succeeded soon, this was the end. By dawn, the exodus would be in full force. Mountain tops and mines, wilderness and desert, any spot offering apparent seclusion would in a day or two be black with refugees possessed of the same notion.

The physician did not tell Langley of his encounter. The physicist was already working at top speed. He paused long enough to wolf a sandwich and hot coffee, before resuming his calculations with worried eyes.

The room seemed warm, oppressively warm. Chard wiped his forehead. His burning face was sign enough that he needed sleep and rest. But there was not time for sleep and rest. He toiled for hours, as the evening waned, and gradually a vast uproar began to rise above the city, and Chard knew that the panic was on. Flushed and weary, he paid little attention to what went on outside, and sensed the noise as something far away and impersonal. Voices—the voice of the mob—

Chard suddenly tensed, every sense alert, listening with a dull feeling of futility to what he had feared he would hear.

There was a faint murmur in the room. The whisper came from his own body!

His memory flashed back to his encounter with the fleeing stranger. He recalled the sensation of heat and fever that had been growing on him ever since. The whispering plague dwelt in the laboratory.

Langley muttered. "If only I could define the image! I'm close to success, so close that I can't see what's wrong, something that would be obvious to any one else."

Chard felt like blurting, "It doesn't matter now. The end is here. Let's go out and celebrate our last day of life." Instead, he looked at the photo-screen where the blurry objects swam and spoke tiredly:

"If you've got the magnification you want, and can't define the image, maybe the trouble isn't in the invention at all. Maybe it would work per-

fectly except for some outside influence. Could cosmic rays cause any interference?"

Langley shouted, "You utter idiot! Why didn't you think of that before? Come on, help me get a load of lead sheaths." He ran toward a storeroom, Chard at his heels.

As they set up the heavy plates around the mechanism, Langley talked excitedly. "That's the source of error. It's so obvious, I couldn't see it. Cosmic rays are bombarding us all the time in great numbers, and while they're submicroscopic, they're large enough and strong enough to affect not only the micro-organisms you're after, but even the selenium cells and electrical equipment."

The whispering grew louder. "What of it?" Langley exulted. "I must have caught it myself by now, but I'll be satisfied just to see and know what is happening. It's inevitably appropriate that we should make the discovery in a drop of your own blood. Get a slide ready and we'll shoot it under the beam."

Chard's mood had passed from despondency to eager excitement. In the moment of action he became the cool, skilled physician of old. He pricked his thumb, caught a pin point of blood on a slide, and passed it to Langley. The air was stifling for they had left an opening only at the floor on one side of the hastily constructed lead chamber.

Langley slipped the slide under the focal beam while Chard kept his eyes glued to the photoscreen.

An image leaped into clear, true definition on the photoscreen, an image that changed and flowed only with the activity of life itself. He was looking at a world that no man had ever before seen, the world of infinitesimal micro-organisms, and filterable viruses. Sick and appalled at what he saw, the blood pounding through his veins and head till he thought they would burst, stricken into momentary silence and paralysis, he stared at the screen. The mystery of The Whisperers had been solved.

They were living, breathing, organized, intelligent entities! On an inconceivably infinitesimal scale, in an evolutionary pattern alien to everything known to man, they had developed a strange, fantastic civilization. The whisper audible to human ears was the combined sound of trillions and trillions of micro-beings who talked and flourished and evolved through an existence that was time extended to centuries and cycles for them, but which was time foreshortened to moments and hours in the universe of man.

The screen was a blur of such frenzied activity that Chard could merely guess at much that happened. He caught glimpses of micro-beings of feathery outlines. He had fleeting impressions of an incredible life urge. The incalculable hosts of The Whisperers lived, struggled, and died for basic driving impulses of multiplication and colonization, and for ulterior purposes beyond comprehension. Hordes of them shot from the screen. Their vanishing offered to Chard a reason for the astonishing speed with which the plague had spread. They must have passed easily, with or without the aid of devices assembled of body materials, from the partially oxygenic medium of blood to the impurely oxygenic medium of air.

Langley stared in the fascination of horror at the screen of teeming, sub-human life that poured through the cycles of an extra-terrestrial evolution. He realized far less than Chard what was happening, but the little he understood made him ill. He experienced a crawling sensation as though every molecule became separately conscious of the parasitic legions that it nourished. The Whisperers—multiplying and swarming through his body in numbers that could not be expressed in less than astronomical units—

His scalp prickled. In almost inaudible tones, he mused, "Knowledge! Lord, I'd rather live in ignorance the rest of my days."

The sound of his voice broke Chard's spell of inertia. Langley had done his work and succeeded brilliantly. Without it, Chard could have made no progress. Now, the physician thought in terms of the unpleasant realities that always accompany medical analysis. The facts were at hand. The facts must be intercepted. His mind worked with concentrated power to solve the problem. A pathologic condition existed. A great number of potential counteragents were known. Which of them would be most likely to neutralize the condition in the briefest time?

Chard looked as if about to speak, but ducked out of the lead chamber instead. He ran to the telephone and talked for several minutes. When he hurried back, he found Langley by the shelf of narcotics.

The physicist asked wearily, "Morphine or cocaine?"

Chard stared, "Neither. I just called the Television News Bureau and the Department of Public Health. The voice of The Whisperers will be silent within a week. You and I are going to get drunk!"

The physicist looked puzzled. "Have you lost your mind? In the first place, I don't drink, and—"

"Nevertheless, you are going to be saturated with alcohol by drinking, by intravenous injection, or by any other method you prefer! Narcotics would be as efficient, but the world supply isn't large enough and the cure would be as bad as the disease.

"Alcohol is rapidly absorbed through the lining of the stomach, enters the blood stream, and circulates to every part of the body. I'll give the world a headache and a hangover, but all except weaker constitutions will survive. The point is that temporary intoxication to man will be permanent oblivion to The Whisperers. Their existence and spread depend on rational processes. Paralyze their ability to think, eat, or act, and they are done for. A night of revelry for us will be a century of death for them!"

The truth and the fulfillment of Chard's prophecy are now familiar matters. It has been regretted that the remedy required extermination of The Whisperers before the secret of their enigmatic civilization was solved. It may never be known whence they came, or whether they themselves constructed the projectile that brought them. The later uses of Langley's invention, and the vast new worlds of knowledge that it enabled man to explore have a value that can not be estimated. The Whisperers are gone. Only a few slides exist upon which their dead, inert forms are preserved, but the sound of their voices is a memory that can never be forgotten.



# When Half-Worlds Meet

by John Michel

*This is probably the strangest science-fiction plot ever dreamed up. It came about like this. The author and your editor happened one evening to drop in for a cup of coffee in a Greenwich Village cafeteria and to be discussing (as only science-fiction fans would) the speed of light. It so happened that our table was located in an odd corner, where two wall-length mirrors opposed each other and we could look down into a long curving corridor of our own reflections, growing dimmer into the dimensional distances. Since it had been recently discovered that light loses velocity when it is reflected, the speculation turned to what would happen if a beam of light were to be reflected back and forth between absolutely parallel and perfect reflectors. Obviously it would eventually come to a stop! And thereby hung a tale that had never been written. So John Michel wrote it.*

JO-AD DUG his heels into his hump-backed steed's ribs and grunted.

"The moon used to be up there," he said morosely, pointing skyward.

"What did it look like?"

He stared at the heavens and, for an instant, his dull eyes glittered.

"Mo-Ad, there was nothing to compare with it in the sky for sheer beauty. A giant globe of the most delicate yellow with black markings over the surface that took on the semblance of a face. It was utilized mainly for romance. Lovers wooed each other in its glow, in cities and countries alike . . ."

Mo-Ad rested himself in his saddle.

"What were cities and countries?" he asked.

Jo-Ad sighed.

"The cities were great beehives of industry—that was something that meant producing articles in quantities," he added hastily as he saw the instant question form upon his son's lips, "wherein they worked and played, lived and died, loved and begat their children. Beehives of industry, where they made by the millions, in almost less time than it takes to tell, the instruments we produce today by hand. Giant social centers where everyone was happy, where everyone was warm and safe. Countries—well, they were sections of land each inhabited by different races of people. Races, my son, were sections of humanity. Some were different from others. Some had black skin, some yellow, some pale like ours. Some had long noses, some short. A lot of them were tall and a lot were runty. They were not like us." He raised his head and, shading his eyes, peered ahead.

"We are approaching the Cliff. You must know of that as well. And when you see it you will understand why our skins are pale and why the skins of the People of the Top are black. . . ."

Mo-Ad broke in, eager to show his father a glimmer of the analytical intelligence that alone of the People of the Bottom was Jo-Ad's.

"But father, you said that no one could ever reach the country of the People of the Top. The Cliff is too high. How then do you know that their skins are black?"

Jo-Ad pulled his burnoose closer about him to protect his thin skin from the evening chill.

"Their bodies have been found—torn and mangled at the bottom. Some careless individuals fell the awful height of the Cliff. According to the ancient reckoning, it is a hundred and fifty miles high. Their skins were as black as coal. You see, Mo-Ad, when the Top grew over the Bottom, the atmosphere poured down on us, leaving a thin layer on the Top and burdening our Bottom with billions upon billions of tons of air. That is why we are pale skinned. The sun must penetrate additional hundreds of miles of atmosphere. The Top people compensated for the loss of air by developing larger lung-capacities."

"And how do you know all these things?" asked Mo-Ad with the skepticism of the very young.

His father looked at him long.

"I have read the Books," he said in an awful voice. "And I know why the Top grew upon the Bottom and why we are pale-skinned and where the Moon went and why we have no industry or cities or countries. And many things more which you shall know."

Mo-Ad jogged along in silence for awhile. The undulating desert flowed by. Far ahead loomed the Cliff.

"I have heard it said," he breathed softly at length, "that once this land was buried beneath a bottomless ocean."

"You heard aright." Jo-Ad sat up very straight and gazed sadly about the empty wilderness lit by the rays of the setting sun. "The ocean grew when the Top grew and pressed down what it grew over and the Bottom was flooded. The cities were drowned and almost all of the people. The machines rusted and fell apart and their secrets were lost. Presently, the People of the Top, who had all these things, bored through their planet and began draining away the ocean that buried the Bottom. It flowed into the empty chasms under the Top. In a little while it was all gone. The remnants of the people from whom we are descended came down from the mountains to the dry lands and grew and multiplied—but slowly. In the course of time some water returned—and thus our people lived." He paused and looked at the looming Cliff with hatred. "But enough . . . we are approaching the Cliff."

High soared the Cliff, one hundred and fifty miles into the dense air. From where their camels coursed, up and down and over the sand-hills, they could see its curving bulk stretching away to the uttermost limits of the horizon. An insurmountable barrier, it reared its grim, absolutely

sheer wall to invisible heights. The top was lost in shifting clouds that poured over the barrier and floated down to condense in watery vapor which buried half its height in impenetrable mists.

"It goes around the world," gasped Jo-Ad, as he was jogged roughly by his camel, "and no one can climb it. It is too high. It is too smooth."

"But the flying birds. Could they not have scaled the Cliff?" asked Mo-Ad naively.

"I have told you, my son, that all those secrets were lost when the Bottom was drowned."

Mo-Ad stopped his camel and slid to the ground. He set his feet firmly in the sandy soil. He looked inquiringly at his father who also dismounted and stood, lost in thought, one hand on the tether of his mount, the other cupping a weary chin.

"Father, where is the Moon?"

Jo-Ad lifted his head and pointed.

"Beyond the Top. During the course of ages, the uneven pull of the Top slowed the satellite in its orbit to a point where it hung stationary in the sky above the Top." He bent down and with the end of his camel-whip drew a diagram in the sand. What looked like two badly fitted halves fitted to each other, one greatly overlapping the other. A smaller full sphere hung beyond the wider half.

"This is what the three planets look like now, Mo-Ad," he said.

Mo-Ad gazed earnestly at the diagram, eager to please his father who had done what no other parent of his race would—imparted precious knowledge to his son.

"And what is the name of the Top, father?"

"Mars, my son."

Professor Charters Randolph was no snob. He did his plowing himself. The little college town was too poor to support him adequately and pay for the wild experiments his faculty colleagues frowned on. He cracked a whip in the air above the heads of his two blowsy horses and felt the plow-belt about his waist pulled forward sharply.

His action was automatic, because he really wasn't thinking of the plowing at all. The long furrows lengthened out behind him in mathematically straight lines, and occasionally he absently cracked his whip and was pulled forward when he got around to noticing that the plow had stopped. Randolph jerked his head up and mopped it with a violently red handkerchief. He looked around with a startled gaze and realized that he and his horses had reached the end of the field. Wearily he started to turn them around. Half-heartedly, he hitched up the belt encircling his waist, then, suddenly let it drop, stepped up to the horses, disconnected their reins and with a slap on the rump sent them ambling toward the barn. He took himself painfully toward the distant cottage settling like a grey brick on the brown hill-side.

His wife Martha greeted him in the front yard which crouched close to the country road. She waved a hand at him and wiped the sweat off

her own brow with the other. Hard toil had changed Martha Randolph from the city stenographer who had fallen in love with the Professor into a tall, hard woman of the soil who broke her back during the day with farm chores and spent the evenings reading Shakespeare and holding fuming test tubes for her husband.

"Martha, I'm sick of it," he said with a droop in the corners of his mouth. He passed her and went on up to the porch where he doused his sweating head in a pail of cold water and dipped a panful of it into his mouth.

She came up behind him and, laying her cheek against his shoulder, hugged him fiercely.

"Go on in the house and lay down," she suggested.

He turned to her and stood arms akimbo.

"No, I'm going into the lab. When's supper? Is Charley coming over?"

She bent over the pail of fresh water and took a long drink before replying. When she straightened, she flashed her white teeth in the light of the sun.

"Charley'll be over after supper. We're having steak. Want any beer? I can drive into town."

"Never mind, darling," he replied, "steak's enough. Thanks."

He turned abruptly and walked around the house to a small shed with a heavy door which he unlocked with a big old-fashioned key. The interior was dark. He carefully lit a kerosene lamp and sent some of the gloom skittering.

Well, he thought, I'm in my castle now. The farm and the back-breaking labor lay far behind. This was his citadel—his citadel of science, as he called it, a safe haven against a disintegrating world. He pulled up a chair, sat down and looked around, gloating.

The interior of the shack was rough pine, unpainted, but clean. Lined with shelves, it measured about fifteen by twenty feet and was connected with the rest of the house with a very small door at one end. The shelves were piled high with colored bottles of chemicals and under them, at intervals along the walls, big machines were set on concrete slabs sunk into the earth. Big metal working machinery, bought and paid for with sweat and blood and tears; machinery begrudged Randolph by a jealous world that took far more than it gave. He shrugged his shoulders in the half darkness and smiled a crooked smile. He'd given it more than it could have given him. Invention after invention to brighten the world and clean up the dirty corners. It had all been stolen, by crooked business men and greedy schools. The Professor was a singular man in his conduct toward the world. He was invariably honest and direct. So his brain work was stolen and he starved more often than he ate.

Between the machines, which were fed by heavy power cables leading out to the field where power lines leaned crazily in all directions on their way up the mountain to the town, were piles of metal slabs, wires, tools, insulation and more chemicals in cans. Where the shadows lay, thrown by the feeble light of the kerosene lamp, they loomed dirty and like a sham-

bles. He didn't care. The roughness of the assemblage of machinery pleased him. It owed nothing to the outside world. But it was his baby.

He sat in the darkness for a while and then Martha called him in to supper. They ate slowly and meditatively and looked at each other with deep love in their eyes, and sopped huge chunks of bread into the gravy and ate them. As they were having coffee, the unlocked front door opened and Charley Small came in.

"Evenin' folks," he said slowly and took off his cap and sat down.

He was a big, lumbering farmer, who had a brain with a razor's edge and nobody but the Professor to give it something to cut into. He worked during the day at an iceplant in the town and spent as many of his evenings as he could sitting with Randolph in his shack helping him fashion strange machines. He had a queer love for the shiny contraptions turned out by his friend. Somehow, they signified the outside world to him with all its splendor and glory. He was a poet, but only the Professor and his wife knew it.

Martha smiled up at him and pushed a chair against the supper table.

"Have some coffee," she said.

Charley sat down and took a newspaper out of the back pocket of his work overalls and handed it without a word to the Professor. Randolph picked it up, glanced briefly at the headline and threw it into a corner where reposed stacks of old papers. They often came in handy for kindling fires in the big brick stove.

"What's new?" asked Randolph as Martha got up and reached for the big coffee pot.

Small scratched his thick-thatched head and grunted.

"Nothin' much, Randolph."

"Get that tobacco?"

The big man hitched his pants and brought out a huge package of cut plug. Randolph reached for it.

"Thanks; don't know what I'd have done without it."

He pushed back his plate and leaned aside while Martha stood over them pouring coffee. When she'd finished, she walked over to a shabby studio couch, reclined on it and snapped on a small radio. Presently the strains of a symphony filled the confines of the small house.

They finished their coffee in silence.

"Say, Doc," began Small after a few minutes, "I got a question." From a vest pocket underneath the overalls he produced two small mirrors, of the variety sold on notion counters in five-and-dime stores, and held them up to the dim light.

"What are those?" asked Randolph, interested. He filled his pipe and puffed, looking at the two baubles suspended in the air before his eyes.

"Just an idea I got today. I was sittin' in Sloan's lunch. Sloan has two mirrors on opposite walls and I was sittin' between 'em. I got a look at myself *down* both mirrors—and there I was about a million times on both sides . . ."

The Professor chuckled.

"Rather startling when you see it for the first time."

The big man scratched his head again.

"Yeah. Sorta curious. There I was curving away on both sides. Say, why don't those images line up?"

Randolph chuckled again.

"They can't. No two mirrors can be brought exactly into line with each other. In the first place, no two planes are ever exactly parallel and that's what you'd need to start off with. Even the slightest unbalance is enough to start the images curving away. And they always do."

The two small mirrors still hovered in the air.

"Yeah, but suppose you could get two of them things in exact line with each other. What would happen?"

Randolph looked at him queerly and thought to himself for a minute. Well, what *would* happen? It had never happened before, so he supposed some result was bound to occur. For some reason, an irrelevant picture of an explosion filled his mind, then faded. It had been a random thought, nothing more. He balanced his pipe in his hands.

"I don't know just what would happen. It's a phenomenon that has never been observed." He reached over and plucked the two mirrors from the big man's calloused hands.

"Yes," he mused, "I wonder what would happen . . ."

"For instance," interrupted Small, "if you could do it and I got between 'em, what would happen to the reflection? Would it stay there after I got out of the way?"

Randolph looked at the mirrors and held them up.

"No, I don't think it would. The reflection is light and light has mass. Astro-physicists have proven that light loses velocity every time it is reflected. Somewhere the reflection would stop and become mass. Natural law governs *that*."

"Well," persisted Small, "what would happen to it after it turned solid? Could you put your hand on it?"

The Professor looked up with a jerk. He turned wide open eyes on Small.

"I—I suppose you could. Every time the light was re-reflected from mirror to mirror it would lose some of its velocity and get nearer the solid state."

The other drank his coffee and lit a pipe himself.

"Suppose," he continued along his line of reasoning, "suppose you got a bit of sunlight in between 'em. What would you have after it stopped?"

Randolph sat up and stared.

"My god!" he ejaculated. "And they say that yokels can't think! Charley, you've got an idea there. But—it's impossible! Nobody could ever get two mirrors in exact alignment. If they did . . . but damn it, nobody can."

Small stared moodily into the gloom.

"Well," he said, licking his lips. "It was a good idea."

They played cards for awhile and then went into the laboratory where

the two of them worked over some machines shaping odd lengths of metal and wood. Finally Small went home.

In bed that night, the big man's idea haunted Randolph's dreams. He awoke at last from a deep sleep, sweating. He'd been dreaming about mirrors. He'd been caught between two of them in exact alignment and hurled, spinning, into infinity.

"God!" he ejaculated and ran his fingers through his hair.

His wife stirred and woke up.

"What's the matter, dear?" she asked, shifting around to face him.

He was still running his fingers through his hair.

"Martha," he said after a time, "It's coming again. An idea. Do you think we can go on short rations for awhile?"

She smiled sleepily and kissed him, used to his sudden notions.

"Of course, darling. I didn't marry a plow horse. I married a *man*. Be one. Is it more machines, this time?"

He nodded. "Yes," he said hoarsely.

She kissed him again.

He went down to his shack many evenings now and worked among the spinning machines powered by the little dynamo that hummed endlessly away, driven by the underground river his science had found. Charley Small helped him shape the box he built and the queer mirrors he carefully polished and ground, and stood over him with infinite patience holding the necessary tools like a nurse at an operating table. Gradually the machine he was building took shape.

Martha came down one evening from the upstairs bedroom whence she had retired after supper for a wink of sleep. It was a dark, warm night and both men were working in their pants and undershirts. Their bare feet made pattering noises on the pine floor as they moved and the room was lit up by the weird glow of a small metal-cutting torch wielded by her husband.

As she entered the room, the Professor swung back the visor which protected his eyes from the flame and stood up painfully. He arched his back. She came over and rubbed it for awhile. Charley looked on, one hand on the controls of the torch, the other tamping the ashes in his pipe. His huge eyes glittered with the light of discovery.

"Anywhere near finished?" she asked.

Randolph wiped his hands with some cotton waste and lit his pipe.

"We've got something, and I don't know what we've got. Remember that centrifuge I built for the Polyclinic that made a dozen separate motions simultaneously? Well, this is a hundred times more complicated."

She straightened her gingham dress and tucked away a wisp of hair behind her ear.

"What's that?" she asked, touching a smoothly rounded bump at one end of the metal box lying on the floor. Looking over it she noticed another at the opposite end.

Her husband grunted.

"That's the nub of the whole thing. It equalizes about a million different

factors all at the same time: plane distortion, temperature warp, atmospheric density inside the box, impact of cosmic rays, vibrations from one end of the spectrum to the other and ordinary earth movements. In some ways, though, it isn't as important as this prism." He paused and touched an arrangement of polished glass directly in the center of the top of the steel box. "This reflects light down into the box to another prism which directs the beam toward one of the mirrors mounted on the inside of those bulges."

She considered this for awhile.

"Didn't you tell me that the interior prism was the last stumbling block? You had to get it out of the way without destroying the reflection."

He puffed on his pipe. His eyes lit up with deep satisfaction.

"That's easy—now." He walked to a cabinet and brought out a violin. Caressingly, he ran his fingers down the polished surface.

"At the precise instant when the beam flashes down through the prisms and into the mirrors, I play a certain note on this violin and the interior prism shatters. The note is attuned to its structure and to none other. A neat bit of reasoning. I wonder if it will work."

She smiled, patted him on his shoulder and left.

For a while he stood silent, then lifted the instrument, placed its chin-rest against his throat and played. Charley remained motionless, squatting near the floor, bathed, like a devil out of hell, in the glow of the torch still spitting noisily on a metal grid.

Randolph put down the violin abruptly.

"Let's see if it works," he said softly.

They played with it for a while until their supply of prisms ran out and then opened the box. On the dark metal floor, between the poised mirrors, lay several microscopic lumps of matter that had not been there when they locked the top earlier in the evening.

Randolph shut off the flashlight that had been shining into the primary prism and rolled it into a tool box. He moved to a wooden bench and sat down. Nervously he relit his pipe which had gone out and set his face firmly between his hands, elbows planted on the top of the table before him.

"Charley," he called softly, inclining his head.

The big man shuffled over and leaned heavily on the table, the muscles on his brawny arms standing out like linked walnuts.

"Yeah, it worked. What are you going to do now?"

The Professor looked up at him.

"Charley, I'm going to materialize a sun beam."

The other stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending. Then, the untutored brain, keen, penetrating, direct, suddenly understood. But Small, although a grown man, was still emotionally a child. He ran out, holding his head in his hands.

The next morning Randolph had the thing out in the big pasture. It was a strange sight, the bronzed body bent slightly over the huge box supported on an old table, his arms holding lightly the body and bow of a violin. He opened the shutter of the prism, aimed it at the sun and drew the bow



across the strings of the instrument. There was a tearing noise and a faint tinkle and suddenly it was all over.

Randolph quickly unscrewed the top of the box and looked within. Suspended in the center, directly between the two mirrors, an infinitely tiny, bisected ball of pure light spun and hummed. He'd gotten more than his sunbeam. He'd gotten a tiny half sun.

As he watched, the tiny dot began to grow. In half an hour it was double its original size and getting bigger every minute.

Randolph, paralyzed, stared at the growing dot with undisguised terror. He realized, with awful clarity, that he had stumbled upon something entirely new, and that a whole set of laws governing its action and reaction was coming into being. He fled to the house, frantically grabbed pencil and paper and busied himself for an hour with calculations.

Martha came home from town as he rushed out wildly waving a sheaf of papers. He was shouting incomprehensively, something about the dot growing until it burned the earth to a cinder. She calmed him down as only she knew how and presently he poured out the whole story.

"But if it increases in size only in light, why not bury the thing? It can't grow if it can't feed." Her voice was calm, reassuring.

"The thing will grow on any sort of impact vibration whatsoever. These figures prove it. What about cosmic rays? They penetrate many feet of lead. We'd go bankrupt buying a box big enough to hold it."

She shook her head.

"You told me once that a certain amount of ground depth was the equivalent of the quantity of lead necessary to stop the rays. Why don't you throw it down the crack in the rock on the other side of the pasture?"

He looked at her wildly.

"Darling, of course!" he shouted and danced a jig.

She stood for this a while, then drew him away to the box. Peering over the edge, she glimpsed the evilly glowing whirling dot and shuddered.

"The box is too heavy," she cried, "And that crevice is over half a mile away."

He considered a moment, then brought his fist down on the edge of the table on which the machine rested.

"Martha, empty the fish bowl and bring it back here, quick. Just the fish, not the water!"

She left at high speed and returned in a few minutes. Seizing the huge object, he turned it over, and with a hiss the ball of fire fell into the large bowl of water. Without wasting an instant he cupped a hand over one end and dashed madly for the other end of the field.

He returned in about an hour to find his wife screwing on the top of the box.

"Is it safe?" she asked anxiously, wiping a smear of grease from her hands.

He looked at her with a relieved expression on his face.

"Safe. Buried a thousand feet down."

They walked arm in arm toward the house.

For a while the box was forgotten, but little by little the desire to explore its possibilities grew back in Randolph's mind. He spent long hours of the evenings, poring over calculations, working out its mathematics. Finally he decided to have a go at it again. This time there would be no danger, he promised himself.

He went to see Saunders, the president of the town's small bank.

Saunders was sitting at his desk as he walked in. He blinked his small piggy eyes rapidly and fiddled with the gold watch chain strung from the pockets of his vest.

"Afternoon, Professor," he said evenly in his clipped mid-western accent. "They told me you'd phoned about a loan."

Randolph sat down.

"Yes, I'm conducting some new experiments . . ."

Saunders smiled primly and looked over the top of his pince-nez.

"Yes, yes. Of course, I know of your work. Some very valuable things you turned out for the clinic. Pity you didn't patent them."

As the bank president had been one of the cabal who had swindled him out of the proceeds of his clinical researches, Randolph tried to let this pass with as much aplomb as was possible considering the circumstances.

"I want fifty thousand dollars," he said flatly, without further pause.

Saunders blinked his eyes twice when he heard this. The pince-nez came off and fell with a clank into his lap.

"Wha—what—what's that? Fifty thousand dollars?"

The Professor nodded grimly.

Saunders raised his hands in horror.

"What could you do with so much money?" he asked in a strained falsetto.

"I said that I was conducting some new experiments," replied Randolph firmly.

"Of what nature?"

"I cannot explain that until I've some concrete results to offer. But I need enough money to buy immense quantities of lead. Once that is accomplished I feel that anyone financially connected with the experiment would be in on a goldmine."

"You mean that literally?"

The Professor's face lost its serious mien.

"Yes, I do," he said, smiling. "A goldmine. Quite literally."

Saunders opened his eyes as wide as they could go and pressed a stud on his desk. Within a minute his secretary walked in. The bank president looked up at her with an amused smile playing about his thin lips.

"Please show the Professor out," he snapped, losing his smile almost immediately, "I'm afraid he's slightly touched."

Randolph stared at him for a moment, then began to laugh. He waved the astonished secretary aside and walked out.

There were no experiments for a time after that, and the box lay untouched in a corner of the shack because it represented a trillion tons of unexploded trinitrotoluene. He looked at it during the long autumn evenings, and sometimes his wife came in and stood by his side and regarded

the box anxiously. The bolted top imprisoned a devil and her supple hands caressed away at such times his desire to let it loose.

But it could not remain the same always. His machines were silent, and Charley came over oftener now and helped him stare at the bulky object. Finally flesh and blood collapsed. Caution flew out of the window.

He bought a telescope and rigged it up to focus on small objects such as clay pigeons and dolls bought in the five-and-dime store in the nearby town and he found that when his prisms shattered, a small, almost microscopic, replica lay amid their powdered ruins. Complex physical laws governed the various reactions. All the replicas grew slowly, in proportion to the amount of light used in reflecting them, but faster when more vibrations were allowed to drench them. In some unknown fashion the scanning telescope became almost a living thing, automatically adjusting the rate of expansion in accordance with the light used and the size of the original object. Thus, when one day he trained the refractor on the top of a nearby mountain, the resulting bisected image grew much more rapidly than usual until it threatened to bulge the sides of the reproducing machine. With infinite labor he carted the expanding mass with the generous help of Charley Small to the crevice and buried it safely. Small objects when reproduced reacted differently. Their rate of growth was slower. And there seemed to be a limit. The magical power of the simple telescope astounded him. Sitting at his calculations he concluded that he had stumbled across natural laws unknown previously, operating logically with rigid mathematical precision.

Many strange reproductions followed the first few simple things. The side of a horse, a frothy section of cloud that inundated the shack and only ceased growing when the ground had absorbed it completely, a clock with hands but only a solid mass where the works should have been. The matter composing the objects seemed totally different from any earthly composition. It seemed a sort of rubbery soil that varied in composition, texture and strength; it duplicated the matter of the object, but only in a thin shell.

Presently the crevice filled up. He spent days blasting out another.

The crowning experiment was undertaken on a snowy winter's night in January of the following year. Enconced on a tall chair beside the box, which was mounted on its table in the pasture, and attended by the faithful Small, he opened the shutter of the device after focusing the telescope apparatus on Venus and then calmly drew the bow of his violin across the taut strings.

Venus lay within the reproducer, a small, solid half sphere that grew as they watched it in the pale starlight. Randolph risked for a few moments the faint light of a flashlight shining on the planet. It lay fuming quietly on the bottom, a circular disc, growing, heaving, outlines of mountains and continents appearing. Finally they smashed it to powder with a pickaxe and dumped it down the new hole in the rock.

With money saved from lowered food expenditures and articles written at a constant stream for well-known scientific journals which snapped them up because he was a genius and they knew it, he built large but flimsy

lead boxes which held the halved reproductions of many commonplace objects and some which he never permitted Martha to see. He kept them for a while, made voluminous notes, then disposed of them in the usual way.

When Spring came he understood the process thoroughly.

"Stated simply," he said to Charley as they leaned against a fence watching a nearby stream liberate itself from the winter ice, "it's like this: The light is reflected between the two mirrors and, losing velocity, becomes mass, retaining its inertia. Just pure mass—*matter*, peculiar matter. And it grows. Slower or faster in proportion to the size of the object reproduced. It feeds on vibration because—well, because it's matter that's been born suddenly and knows it's alive. Not really alive, Charley, more like a stretched rubber band that is released and flies past its limit of elasticity. It's based on a physics that seems to operate *through* the fourth dimension and *into* our space. I say the fourth dimension because I don't know where it comes from and that's as handy an explanation as any."

Small scratched his head.

"Can it make money?" he asked naively.

Randolph laughed.

"I told Saunders it could. Yes, with that machine I could reproduce enough gold, by simply focusing the telescope on a treasury Eagle, to buy the continent. And that's precisely why I won't. We'd inevitably over-produce and ruin the market and probably the whole economic system.

"I'm just a damn fool, Charley," he continued, "I've got a God in a box and I can't even ask him for a bent penny."

On a brilliantly sun-lit day in July, a lead box containing an image of the planet Mars cracked from the pressure of the growing half-sphere within and began to expand over the floor of the shack. It grew unhindered because the Professor and his wife were in town buying household goods and nobody was there to stop it.

Charley saw it as he approached the shack on Sunday. He saw the cottage suddenly pushed up in the air from beneath and suddenly a great hollow half-globe of rusty-red with many strange markings and convolutions on its surface began to spread out and grow larger and bulkier on the flat Illinois farm.

By morning it had covered the town and the residents of the whole county were fleeing. Randolph and his wife drove the car until there was no gasoline left in the tanks, then stole some and continued to flee toward the west.

In a month the state was overwhelmed, and the next three months saw the enormous mass of expanding matter pushing out over the Atlantic. Beneath it, from California to New York and from Maine to Mexico, the American continent lay crushed, pulverized. The expanding juggernaut had obliterated the highest development of a culture fifty centuries old.

Randolph and his wife managed to reach the coast and take passage on a steamer that sailed south until it reached a tiny collection of islands near the center of the Pacific. There it landed. And the Professor began to write a diary in which he analyzed the Martian destroyer.

"The ocean level is rising," he wrote, "and soon even these high islands will be inundated. The enormous mass of Mars has filled up the ocean beds and will continue to grow until it reaches its theoretical limit of expansion. That limit is almost precisely half way around the Earth. From where I sit I can see the approaching wall—it must be fifty miles high—which signals the final destruction of life on this part of the globe. The Moon, sun and stars are no longer visible because of the weather. I do not think any life surviving in these latitudes will ever see the Moon again. The added weight on one-half of the planet will exert a tremendous pull and slowly bring it to a standstill, much closer to the Mars half of earth. The people up there—millions must have 'climbed aboard'—will be lighter because the Moon's pull will offset the combined gravitation of Earth and its Martian cap. The people down here will not be lighter or heavier—for they will be dead. I have murdered more than half a world. Maybe I'm the Devil. Maybe I'm just Science gone haywire."

And on another page.

"Today is the last day. I've rigged up a steel container and I'll put these papers in it and throw it into the dead volcano. I don't know why. They're Science and death. It can be of no use to any future civilization. But somehow I feel that it must go on. I feel no regrets. Mainly because the world was destroyed not by its evil but by its best. The end is clean. The end is Science."

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Mo-Ad stepped back from the diagram and thoughtfully erased it with his foot. He glanced timidly at the Top and regarded for a long moment its lacy crown of swirling vapor.

"Is there no way to mount the barrier?" he asked, finally.

His father's face was grim.

"There is no need for us now to conquer the Cliff, Mo-Ad. Shortly we shall return to our home in the South and I shall create from the Books—with your help, my dear son—a machine that will rescue our people from this dry half-world of hunger and death. Come."

For many days and nights, the two traveled toward their home and came at last to the small village of tents that was the mightiest metropolis of the Bottom. They were welcomed joyously by the small population and feasted for several days.

At the end of a week, Jo-Ad drew Mo-Ad away from his studies and showed him several old notebooks. On the cover of one, old, threadbare, worn-eaten, was written in rust-brown ink the words, "Diary of Charters Randolph." Two others, in the same condition of decay and decrepitude, were printed books. There were also several tightly-rolled parchment scrolls of a peculiar blue sheen with white lines upon them.

Mo-Ad read the Diary through. It was written in an ancient form of his tongue, but the surpassing intelligence inherited from his father, the sole intellectual genius of the Bottom, stood him in good stead. When he was thoroughly acquainted with the story, Jo-Ad began work.

Out of the poor materials dug from the earth by the tribe, he fashioned

with infinite labor a small mirror-lined box surmounted with an intricate prism arrangement of smaller mirrors which were polished with great pains by Mo-Ad. Presently the apparatus, at the end of six months, stood complete in the sandy open circle surrounded by the city of tents.

In the deep blackness of one starry night, Jo-Ad gathered the members of his tribe together and explained that they were to go forth in the morning upon a great adventure. He bade them pack their goods upon all the available camels. Then, with Mo-Ad, he went to the Box.

For a while he did nothing but stand silently in the darkness staring at the sky. Mo-Ad, by his side, grew restless.

"Look, my son," cried Jo-Ad suddenly, pointing to a dim red star slowly rising from the horizon. "That is the planet Mars. It was the old God of War. He was a powerful God, but ever stronger was Jupiter, the mightiest of them all. Observe, Mo-Ad, the great blue planet far above. That is the planet Jupiter. And tomorrow, the King of the Gods will resume his sway."

He drew from beneath his garments a simple one-stringed musical instrument, stepped to the small, crude telescope connected to the prisms and sighted along its length, bringing the barrel into line with the blue planet. With a free hand he opened the shutter. Then, raising his instrument he poised himself in the cold desert air and drew a short bow across the single string.

"Now," he breathed. And as the squeaky note died away, a faint tinkle sounded on the air.

Jo-Ad dropped the crude violin and with his son's aid unscrewed the top of the Box. He peered into its depths once, and heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"We shall wait, Mo-Ad, for the rising of the sun," he said.

# The Superperfect Bride

by Bob Olsen

*Plastic Surgery made vast strides during the Second World War, when it came into general use for the repair of wounded soldiers and civilians. It has come to be an accepted thing, this branch of medical science which was originated primarily to appease the vanity of wealthy women. A new nose, an uplifted chin, an erased scar were the incentive—all in the name of vanity. In this story something like a Frankenstein's creation theme has been diverted to beauty's cause . . . with amusing and piquant results.*

HOW would you like to marry a woman who is absolutely perfect in face and form?" asked Doctor Goddard.

"Is there such a woman?" Broderick doubted.

"Judge for yourself." He pressed a button; and, as if operated by the invisible hands of spirits, the green curtains at the end of the room parted and swayed open.

Astounded beyond measure by the unexpected sight which met his eyes, Broderick sat for a moment of pulseless rapture; then, a sudden throbbing of arteries, he leaned forward, his eyes bound as if by invisible wires to the female form which the open curtain had disclosed.

She was nude, and yet not naked, since the heavy profusion of lustrous yellow hair, which fell to her knees, clothed her in a garment more modest than a bathing suit.

Held as if by some mesmeric power, Broderick remained seated until the curtains mysteriously and silently fell together. Then he rose to his feet, and, with the steps of a somnambulist, faltered toward Goddard.

"Open the curtains again, please! I didn't have time—Oh, please let me see her again. Won't you let me push the button myself?"

"Go ahead, but don't blame me for what happens."

At Broderick's touch the green curtains again swayed open. A cry of disappointment escaped from his lips—the alcove beyond was empty.

"Be patient, inopportune youth," Goddard interposed. "You shall see her again in half an hour. Perhaps you may even be permitted to kiss her hand. Only give her time to dress. And now about the answer to your question? Do you think there is such a thing as a perfect woman?"

"Perfect? She is superperfect! I've never seen anything in sculpture or painting to compare with her. It is impossible to believe that such a lovely

creature could have been born. She must have been created, full-grown, by a God who models with flesh."

"You are right," said Goddard. "She was not born, but created; and I am her creator."

"You her creator? What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. I made her what she is. Shall I tell you how I did it? It may be some time before Eve is ready."

"Yes, yes, tell me, I beg of you."

"As you perspicuously remarked a moment ago, it is impossible for a perfect being to be born. Nature produces many handsome things but none of them are absolutely flawless. Go into the garden, and select the prettiest blossom you can find. A careful examination convinces you that it is absolutely perfect, but scrutinize it through the penetrating lens of a microscope, and you discover countless blemishes, and irregularities of outline, which would bar it completely from the realm of artistic perfection.

"As with the tiny flower, so with the big things in the world of beauty. Gaze upon a wonderful landscape, so stupendous, so enchanting that, to the casual observer, it seems the utter climax of perfection, but the discerning eyes of the trained aesthete would find it lacking in unity, balance and harmony. As a scene it may be beautiful; but as a picture it is full of faults of composition, exaggeration in coloring, incongruities of structure and over-vividness of detail.

"No artist dares to paint a landscape exactly as he sees it. His mission is to select, to modify, to recombine, and thus, from the parts which nature offers him, to construct a complete, unified, beautiful whole.

"Poe brings out this idea in his story called 'The Domain of Arnheim.' You've read it? No? Well, you ought to. It's a masterpiece of descriptive diction. It tells about a man with the soul of an artist and a poet, the fortune of a Croesus, and a fervid passion for happiness. He employed a portion of his great wealth in constructing a garden, in which every individual nook and vista offered to the eyes of the observer a beautiful and artistically perfect picture. This he accomplished through an exalted form of landscape gardening, using all the individual units just as they occurred in nature, but eliminating recombining, rearranging and supplementing according to the absolute laws of art.

"The wealthy landscape gardener regarded this as the realization of the highest ideal of beauty. I do not agree. To my mind, aesthetic perfection can only be attained by a single unified object, which is small enough to be taken in with a solitary glance, and yet rich in infinite details of form and coloring, so that the eye, while keeping the lovely whole ever focussed on the retina, is constantly discovering new elements of beauty to admire. Of all individual objects in the universe there is none so capable of variation of beauty and ugliness as the human body, especially the body of a woman.

"For centuries, sculptors and artists have striven to delineate human forms of consummate beauty, yet none has fully succeeded. The nearest approaches to perfection have been achieved by those who used composite



models, combining the face of one with the torso of another and the limbs of a third.

"Even with this method, the results produced have been far from faultless. Witness, for instance, the learned criticism of the classic example of feminine grace, the statue of the Venus de' Medici. Edwin Chadwick, a noted scientist and connoisseur, says that the Venus de' Medici is lacking in two most important attributes of human beauty—health and mentality. Her chest is too narrow, indicating insufficient development of the lungs; her limbs are without evidence of due training of the muscles; and her cranium and face are deficient in all traits of intellect.

"Were it possible for the sculptor to produce a flawless model of a woman's figure, he is still woefully handicapped since he can only represent form, without color or any other attribute of the living being. The painter has the advantage of being able to impart the hues of nature. By skilful shading he also gives his flat canvas a third dimension, suggesting solidity, and elegance of contour.

"But neither the painting nor the statue can depict one of the most important attributes of living beauty, namely motion. To be perfectly beautiful, a creation must have the breath of life, and the power of locomotion. Byron was right when he said:

"I've seen more living beauty, ripe and real  
Than all the nonsense of their stone ideal."

"He forgot, though, the fact, of which you seem cognizant, that it is impossible for blind nature to produce anything which possesses complete and faultless pulchritude. Unlike a poet, the perfect Venus must be made, not born.

"It is to the creation of this lofty ideal of a living, moving, intelligent woman, absolutely lovely in body and mind, that I have dedicated my lifetime of artistic and scientific research and my entire fortune. You have just seen in Eve the realization of this great ambition."

He paused a moment to observe the effect of his discourse on his young listener. Broderick had followed him with a fluctuating, petulant interest. Now he eagerly cried, "You said I might see her again;—that I might kiss her hand."

"Yes, yes; but pray be patient. She's not half ready yet to receive you. Aren't you interested in the process of her creation?"

"Indeed I am, but only let me see her for a moment, then I'll gladly listen to you."

Slightly offended, Goddard lapsed into a moody silence.

Broderick got up and paced the length of the floor three successive times—then exclaimed, "For God's sake, speak. I can't stand this suspense. Tell me more about Eve."

"Please be seated and compose yourself. You want to know how I accomplished this great and wonderful task? Hasn't a possible means suggested

itself to you? I was obliged to waste a great deal of time in futile study, observation and experiment before I arrived at the right solution.

"At first I thought I could encompass my purpose through eugenics, which is nothing more than the application to the human race of familiar rules, which have been practiced for centuries in the scientific breeding of other animals. But the fault with this method is that, although it is possible to develop strongly some peculiar or characteristic variation, it is not so easy to remove completely those irregularities which make an organism imperfect.

"Take a specific instance. Let us assume that we have found a woman whose only flaw is a small nose. We may mate her with a man who is nearly perfect except for a nose which is a trifle larger than it should be. From this union we might expect to produce a child with a well-proportioned nose, but we can have no assurance that the progeny may not have a nose which is either larger than its father's or smaller than its mother's. Then, too, the matter of sex variation introduces an element of uncertainty; and, worst of all, experiments of this sort require an inordinate amount of time, besides being attended by overwhelming difficulties, the nature of which you can readily surmise."

Broderick became restless again. "Yes, but Eve," he rudely interrupted.

"I'm coming to her in just a minute. She is what might be called a synthetic woman; she was made by combining the complete living parts of no less than twelve different women."

Aghast, Broderick stared at him. "I don't understand you," he stammered.

"You must have heard of bone grafting, homoplastic transplantation, and other marvels of modern surgery. Perhaps you are familiar with some of my attainments along that line."

"I remember reading about a girl whom you treated after her face was badly burned. Didn't you cover her cheek with the skin taken from her thighs?"

"Yes. That is a very simple operation. Those involving the transplanting of organs and limbs are much more difficult, yet not impossible to the surgeon who knows his trade. As early as 1908, Debert succeeded in grafting the lower leg of one dog to the thigh of another, in such a way that it appeared perfectly normal. It was even before that time that Lexer, using the method of juxtaposition, transplanted the entire knee joint of a child. But more wonderful still is the work of Alexis Carrel, who, you know, invented a method of joining large blood vessels by clamping them to stop the flow of blood and then sewing them together with silk thread. I have conducted a large number of experiments on animals and human beings, and have improved the methods of Lexer, Debert and Carrel.

"But I am more of an artist than a surgeon. Surgery is my vocation and art my avocation. It therefore occurred to me that by combining my artistic taste and my surgical skill, I could model in flesh and bones, just as the sculptor models in clay. Taking another hint from the artist, I resolved to

create a living woman of unsurpassed beauty, by joining together parts which, though taken from imperfect individuals, were themselves free from flaw.

"Of course it was necessary that the greater part of my composite woman be taken from one body, since it is of course extremely difficult and dangerous to make many alterations in the so-called vital portions of the human anatomy—the head and the torso. My first task, therefore, was to find a woman who embodied perfection in these essential parts.

"I finally discovered, in the person of a young woman for whom I set a broken leg, all the qualities which I required. By good fortune, she, like yourself, was an orphan with no near relatives living. She had an independent income of about eighteen hundred dollars a year. A well-known university had granted her a bachelor's degree, although she was only seventeen years old. Her interests were mainly for art, literature, and music, but she had also done work in science and philosophy. She was very fond of all forms of outdoor sport, in fact it was while skating that she sustained the injury which first brought her to me.

"Her torso, her neck and her head were absolutely perfect, although the other parts of her body were susceptible to improvement. You may fancy the delicacy with which I broached my purpose to her. Finally, by appealing to her devotion to art, and to the feminine ambition to surpass all others in beauty, I won her consent. She became my adopted daughter, and the heiress to my entire estate.

"I began by providing Eve with a new head of hair. Her own hair was pretty enough—a glossy amber brown,—light and fluffy,—but bobbed, as is the case with nearly all women today. The scalp she now wears used to belong to a Norwegian servant girl, from whom I bought it for five thousand dollars, giving her Eve's hair in exchange. When Ingemar recovered and found that she still had a full head of growing tresses, she was immeasurably pleased. She said her long golden hair had always been too much of a bother to her anyway, and she liked her new hair better.

"In a similar way, I exchanged Eve's imperfect parts for flawless members from other girls, who consented to the transfer for considerations varying from one to twenty thousand dollars. Her ears belong to an English girl, and her lips used to grace a French beauty—but her nose is her own; I merely remodeled it a trifle, reducing its size by removing portions from the inside.

"I got her left arm from a girl who is an expert swimmer, and her right from one who loves tennis, but hadn't played enough to overdevelop it. Two dancers, chosen from among five hundred chorus girls, supplied her legs, at ten thousand each. I found it easier to induce two women to trade each a leg, than to get one to take the risk of sacrificing both limbs. Besides, it very rarely happens that both arms or both legs of any one person are perfect mates.

"The feet belonging to this pair of legs I could not use. They were too deformed by the combined effects of tight shoes and walking on the toes. It was exceedingly difficult to find two perfectly formed feet. Those accus-

tomed to being imprisoned in modern shoes were cramped and abnormal, while the feet of European peasant girls who had always gone barefooted were too coarse and large. I solved the problem by selecting a girl who had always worn sensible shoes, and having her go barefooted for two months before I operated on her.

"I had the hardest job in obtaining a perfect right hand. Her left hand I bought from a masseuse, who was willing to sell her other one also, but I couldn't use it on account of a tiny scar on her little finger. Finally I found a perfect mate to her left hand on the person of a musician. She refused to sell her hand at any price, and I actually had to kidnap her. When she discovered that I intended to take her hand by force, she agreed to submit voluntarily for twenty thousand dollars. Four months after the operation, she was able to play the piano as well as ever. It was just six weeks ago that I put the finishing touches to my masterpiece. Now Eve is completely perfect."

"You speak of exchanging member for member," said Broderick, "I don't understand how you can do that."

"My assistant, Doctor Mann, and I work together. He removes the member from Eve while I am separating the corresponding part from the other woman. Every incision and cut made by me is reproduced with mathematical exactitude by him, so that the surfaces of the severed portions are precisely identical in outline. Then, while the members are still warm and living, they are exchanged and attached by methods with which every surgeon is familiar. While I am fastening the new part to Eve's body, Doctor Mann performs a similar operation on the other girl. In a month, both have complete and perfect use of their new limbs."

"But surely, all this horrible cutting and slashing must leave some marks."

"Why so? Haven't you ever cut yourself with a razor, and watched the wound heal? In a week or two, the skin over the injured place cannot be distinguished from the rest of your face. It is thus that the skin grows over the places where the parts are joined together. You shall see for yourself. Eve must be ready by now." He pushed the button, and once more the curtains spread apart.

The woman who stood in the opening was attired in the flowing white draperies of Greek antiquity. Except for light, corded sandals her feet were bare. Her hair was parted in the middle, and was gathered in a high roll at the back of her head, from which fell a thick cluster of curls. It seemed a perfect picture.

At a gesture from Goddard, she stepped forth, every movement a reflection of superb elegance and grace, combined with a singular suggestion of alertness and power.

"Eve," said Goddard. "Let me present Mr. Charles Broderick."

She inclined her head slightly, and held out the faultlessly manicured hand of the masseuse. Broderick took it as if it were a piece of priceless, fragile china. The mere contact of her warm, magnetic fingers sent through his frame a thrill such as he had never before experienced.

"May I kiss it?" he asked in a trembling voice.

A quizzical smile from Goddard. "Young man, never ask for a kiss. If you want one, take it." Broderick lost no time in complying, with fervid lips, to the suggestion of the older man, who continued: "That may not be sound ethics, but it's good practical common sense. Now see if you can find where that hand joins on to the forearm."

In vain Broderick searched for a scar. Not a scratch or blemish could he discover.

"Here is where I attached her arm," said the doctor, running his finger over her bare shoulder. I'll defy you to find a mark of the joint. And you remember what I told you about her lips? Would you suspect that they ever belonged to anyone else?"

"Never! Oh, that I might kiss those luscious lips!" And, suddenly recalling Goddard's bit of philosophy concerning osculation, he thrust his arm about her neck and made a sudden effort to kiss her mouth. The doctor stopped him just in time. A crimson flood mantled Eve's cheeks, to the great delight of Broderick, who thus perceived that she was really human and not merely an animated statue.

"Take your time, rash youth," the doctor laughed. "Helen of Troy was not won in five minutes. Eve's lips are not for you—unless—"

"Unless?"

"Unless you agree to certain essential conditions."

"Name them."

"It is a long story. Eve knows it already, and so will not be interested. You will excuse her while I explain."

With supple litheness, she stepped to the door. Broderick's eyes followed her until the curtains closed behind her.

Then he turned to Goddard with, "Now for the conditions."

"As you doubtless have surmised, I am looking for a mate for Eve, but he must be as perfect as she is. Since I prefer a college bred man, I enlisted the aid of the physical directors of every large university in the United States. Out of over a hundred candidates sent to me, only three have passed the rigid examination to which I personally submitted them. I'll speak of the other two presently.

"You've been with me now for a week, and my tests have shown that your health, vitality, and your intellect are all excellent. You have no physical defects, except in parts capable of being interchanged.

"What I wish to do is to reconstruct your body, just as I have done in the case of Eve, and thus transform you into a perfect man. This accomplished, you shall marry Eve, assuming the name of Adam Goddard. Thus I expect to found a new race of perfect beings bearing my name.

"The other two men I spoke of passed in all but the last crucial test. One of them went so far as to allow me to put him on the operating bench, but lost his nerve with the first whiff of the ether.

"It is not necessary for you to give your answer today, in fact, I'd rather you would take plenty of time to decide. This is a momentous matter, and is not to be entered into lightly. It will be attended by considerable

pain, and some danger, although both these features will be reduced to the minimum. You may see Eve every day if you wish. To-morrow evening at eight-thirty you will be given an opportunity to test some of her mental powers. You'll be here?"

"I certainly shall."

"In the meantime, take good care of your body. To me, it is worth a million dollars."

Imagine, if you can, the emotions which surged through Broderick's mind as he strode back to his hotel.

Eve had made a profound impression on him—had charmed and fascinated him with her incomparable attractiveness. But he was not in love with her, he told himself, any more than he could be in love with a beautiful statue. How could he love a woman with whom he had not even exchanged two words of conversation? One thing, though, he could not escape—she completely dominated his thoughts, to the exclusion of all else, preventing him from sleeping that night or from engaging in any serious occupation the following day. More and more strongly came the realization that, having seen Eve, the society of all other women would, now and forever, seem insipid. Yet his involuntary admiration for her was rudely tempered by two shocking thoughts; one was the domineering influence which her foster-father exercised over her, and the other was the repulsive notion that she was stuck together, like a picture puzzle or a crazy patchwork quilt.

Repelled as he was by these considerations, they were far outbalanced by the overwhelming force of her many attractive attributes. Three-quarters of an hour before the appointed time, he presented himself at the door of Doctor Goddard's lordly residence.

"You're early," the doctor greeted him.

"Am I? Is Eve at home?"

"Yes. I'll send your card up to her. She'll be down in a few minutes. You're fond of chess, aren't you, Broderick? I judge so from the fact that you represented Princeton in the last cable tournament with Oxford and Cambridge. I've arranged to have you play chess with Eve this evening, if you care to."

Broderick suppressed a smile. "Who ever heard of a woman who could play chess?"

"You will remember questioning the existence of a perfect woman yesterday. As then, I'll answer—judge for yourself."

He drew from a corner a small, beautifully finished table with a chess-board inlaid in squares of ebony and basswood. The pieces were of ivory, exquisitely carved. The doctor began placing them on the board.

"Let me see, Queen on her color, isn't it? I haven't played for such a long while, I've almost forgotten. Ah, here comes Eve."

Broderick's eyes were already fixed on the green curtains, as if loath to miss a single instant of delight in her loveliness. They parted and she appeared, bearing fresh causes for wonder and admiration. Now her

figure was veiled in the graceful folds of a short-waisted empire gown, which smacked of the middle ages, yet suggested the trim smartness of modern fashion. Her arms and neck were bare. The style of her heavily massed golden tresses reminded him of the helmet of Minerva. She bowed, but did not utter a word, as she sat down in the chair which the doctor placed for her.

"White to move, and win," Goddard chuckled; and she immediately responded by leading with her king's pawn.

Broderick played an indifferent, listless game, giving more attention to his opponent's face than to her moves. But suddenly he woke up to find one of his bishops in direct line with an unprotected castle. Without giving the usual careful inspection of the other pieces he swooped down and removed it from its corner. Instantly Eve reached across the board and removed a pawn, putting in its place one of her bishops. Since this placed his king in check, Broderick could do nothing else but take the bishop with his knight. Eve removed the horseman with her queen, which was thus placed in the square next to the king, but protected by a knight.

"Checkmate!" laughed the doctor.

"By jove, so it is. That's a new one on me. It's almost the same as the fool's mate."

"A modification of it which Eve invented herself. The rook was just left for bait."

"She won't catch me napping next time."

The pieces were replaced, with the whites on Broderick's side of the board. There was no more careless dawdling after that. He started out with the fierce aggressiveness which had won him fame in college matches, but still kept every piece carefully protected. Eve played a defensive game, anticipating his complex plots with the weird magic of a sooth-sayer, and foiling them with consummate ingenuity. He realized that he had met an opponent worthy of his skill; and for the moment, his fascinated interest in this unusual game overcame the distracting magnetism of her beauty.

He gleefully felt that he had the upper hand, however, and came near venting his satisfaction in a vain boast, "Checkmate in three more moves." Luckily for him, he restrained this ungentlemanly impulse; for Eve, by an unexpected exchange of queens, suddenly broke through his line of attack, and put him on the defensive.

Broderick fought like a cornered lion, and finally won his way out of a precarious hole, by a series of judicious swaps. He had one piece to the good, and he knew that any even exchange was to his benefit. Finally, after over an hour of playing, he found himself with a rook and a knight, while she had only a single pawn to support her king. He moved the castle to a more advantageous position, where, however, it did not bear on her king. With seeming unconcern, she removed her solitary pawn from the protection of her king, placing it directly in the path of the threatening castle. No sooner had Broderick swept the last pawn from the board than Doctor Goddard slapped the table and yelled, "Stalemate. She can't move, and she's not in check. The game is a draw."

"Well, so it is." He glanced at Eve. The smile on her face was not one of triumph. He knew by the glitter in her clear blue eyes that she, like himself, was a keen lover of the game, and that she played for the sport and not for the pleasure of winning.

Goddard snapped open his watch. "Hello, it's past Eve's bedtime. She has to keep regular hours, you know. Mr. Broderick will excuse you now, my dear. If he wants revenge, you can give him a chance some other time."

Without a word, she arose, bowed to the two men and gracefully withdrew.

"Well," said Goddard, "what's the verdict?"

"She certainly knows how to play chess, or else I'm a dub."

"To-morrow, if you wish, you may have an opportunity to test her physical skill. What is your favorite outdoor sport?"

"I have three favorites—skating, swimming and tennis."

"Eve skates and swims unusually well, but tennis will be the best. Shall we say to-morrow afternoon at three?"

"That suits me all right."

That night, in the seclusion of his chamber, Broderick was beset by a multitude of unusual ideas and conceptions, some of them felicitous, others distressing. The methodical mind of a chess player he had never expected to find in a woman, and this added another strand to the cord which he felt binding him to her. "A woman who can play chess like that would certainly make a man's home life attractive. He wouldn't need to go to the club for recreation."

Thus he reflected, showing that he was a true devotee of the ancient game of war.

But, though her prowess at chess was to him an indication of superior intellectual caliber, yet the mysterious control which her foster-father seemed to exercise over her suggested mental weakness. Broderick even harbored a suspicion, that Goddard's own mind had engineered his defeat, and that he had merely used Eve as a human tool for translating his thoughts into acts.

Fulminated in his brain the realization that he had never heard her speak. Was she deaf and dumb? Surely not deaf, since she responded immediately to suggestions addressed to her.

At the end of several hours of musing, Broderick was certain of only one thing—he wanted to see her again.

The tennis match took place at the appointed time on Goddard's private court. Eve was more delectable than ever, for she had shed her unnatural air of statuesque antiquity and was a thoroughly modern girl of the great outdoors. She was attired in a short wide skirt of white flannel and a low-necked, short-sleeved middy blouse. Her blond hair was coiled in thick braids around her head.

Doctor Goddard acted as umpire, calling the score after each point. Eve served first. She began by sending a swift twister which fell just inside



the corner of the court, and spun along, hardly an inch above the ground.

"Fifteen love," Goddard called.

In the other court, Eve served with her left hand, with equal speed but not quite so much English, and Broderick hooked over a neat back-handed Lawford.

"Fifteen all," and thus the match progressed, with the honors close to even. Nearly all were deuce games, and hotly contested. Eve played a clever, heady game, putting unusual cuts on the ball, and placing it in out of the way corners. She was constantly shifting her racket from one hand to the other, and seemed equally skillful with either. Broderick depended more upon speed than generalship and won most of his points by vicious chops and tearing smashes.

At the end of an hour of playing, the score stood at eleven and twelve, with Eve serving. Two beautiful Lawfords and a lucky stroke which sent the ball against the top of the net so that it dropped gently into his opponent's court, won three successive points for Broderick. Then Eve made a superb burst of unusual speed and brought the score up to deuce. Time after time, he smashed her left-handed serve, but each time she recovered the point from the other court. At last, with the score at "vantage out," she served a ball which Broderick had no difficulty in returning. For several minutes, the ball danced back and forth over the net, then Eve drove a pretty Lawford into his back-hand court, immediately following it up to the net. By wonderful footwork, Broderick reached the ball and returned it, but Eve met it at the net and sent it crashing into the opposite court. It bounded fully twenty feet in the air. Broderick dashed back and leaped for the ball, meeting it squarely, but in doing so he crashed into the back-stop, and fell to the ground in a heap.

His high lob fell but a few feet on the other side of the net, where his opponent was ready to receive it. She could have easily dropped it in the center of the court where he could never have reached it; but instead she struck it underhand, sending a rainbow lob to the back court. It gave Broderick just time enough to regain his feet and send the ball back to her. At the end of thirty more seconds of playing, Eve misjudged one of Broderick's smashes and sent it into the net.

"Game and set. Score thirteen to eleven," announced the doctor. "Broderick, that was marvelous playing."

Broderick leaped the net, grabbed her extended hand, and panted, "Thank you for a wonderful game. You're the best woman player and the finest all around sport I've ever met."

She smiled and bowed in acknowledgment of this splendid compliment, but said nothing.

"Do you want to play any more?" This from the doctor.

Broderick, who was drenched with perspiration and still puffing, answered, "I've had enough for today."

"Yes, that was enough for anyone. I don't care to have Eve over-exert herself. Now you'd better both hurry back to the house and take your showers."

After a refreshing bath and a change of raiment, Broderick joined Goddard in the library.

"Well, how do you like her tennis playing?"

"I certainly enjoy playing with her. She's a clean sport, and refused to take advantage of my accident. After beating her I couldn't very well say that she is an exceptionally good player, but it's the first time I've ever played a twenty-four game set."

They conversed for some time, then Broderick, with an apparent display of embarrassment, said, "There's something that's been worrying me, Doctor, and I'm anxious to know the truth—Is Eve dumb?"

"Dumb?" Goddard exploded. "I should say—But as usual, you'll have to judge for yourself. Come around to-morrow night at eight."

When he arrived the following evening, Broderick was ushered into the music room.

"I've arranged a private musicale, or rather recital. Eve will entertain us, if you care to have her do so."

"I'd be delighted," was the trite response.

"The first number will be a piano solo. Have you any special preferences in music?"

"I'm very fond of Grieg."

"Very well, we'll have the suite from Peer Gynt."

It was arranged with all the formalities of the concert hall. Eve was dressed in a modern décolleté gown. She stepped to the grand piano and immediately struck the opening chords of the Morning Mood. The trill of the lark, the ripple of the brook, all were marvelously counterfeited in this superb combination of tones. Then followed the lugubrious strains of the Death of Asefi the weird, oriental cadences of Anitra's Dance, and last of all the grand climax of thundering chords which culminated in the Hall of the Mountain King.

"Thank you very much," was Broderick's sole comment.

"Next will be a vocal solo," the doctor announced. The younger man held his breath in blissful expectation. At last he was to hear her voice. He was not disappointed, for her tones were characterized by a rich melliflence which appealed to his layman's musical sense far more than those of any professional diva.

The piece she sang was unfamiliar to him, but was fraught with intricacies in the form of runs and sudden transitions from low to high notes, which displayed unquestionable technical skill. It fascinated him, but not nearly so potently as the exquisite lyrical orchid, "I love you truly," which she sang as an encore.

At the close of this selection, Doctor Goddard arose; and, offering a conventional excuse, quietly withdrew. Left alone with the perfect woman, Broderick experienced a singular shyness, which was entirely foreign to his nature, for he was usually quite at ease in feminine society. He wanted to pay her a compliment, yet hesitated lest it sound like the adulation of a sycophant. At last he said, "You have a beautiful voice, Miss Goddard."

Without a suggestion of conceit or feigned modesty, she answered simply, "I'm glad you like it. But I know you sing also. Won't you try this with me?"

She opened a sheet of music, which was by no means unfamiliar to him. It was a duet in which the woman's voice and the man's took alternate parts, finally blending into a united, harmonious appeal:

"Oh love, stay one moment, oh love, stay one moment;  
One moment of ecstasy, thy heart throbbing on my breast.  
Life's long dream is o'er, life's dream is o'er.  
Farewell, farewell."

So perfectly did their voices blend that an expert critic would have judged they had practised together for months. Several other songs they essayed, some complex, some simple; some sentimental, others humorous.

At last she turned to him with a smile and said, "Pardon my seeming inhospitableness if I remind you that my father is very exacting and insists that I retire promptly at ten. I know you won't be offended, and I hope we are good enough friends to be perfectly frank with each other. But before you go, I want you to promise to bring your violin with you next time you come."

"But I play only in a very amateurish way."

"We are both amateurs, and enjoy our art all the more because we pursue it for pleasure alone. From your singing, I know you have the soul of a musician. You'll bring your violin and your favorite pieces of music, won't you?"

"If you wish. And may I see you to-morrow evening?"

"I shall be very glad to have you call to-morrow."

The following evening Broderick found Eve alone in the music room. She rose from the piano bench to greet him.

"Father is working at some experiments, and asks to be excused."

A courteous bow was Broderick's response; but he did not stultify himself by any insincere expressions of regret.

"I see you didn't forget," she remarked anent the instrument case which he carried.

"No, I didn't forget, much as I hesitate to play before you. Please don't be too critical, will you?"

"I don't expect to have anything to criticise. Shall we try something right away? I just love to play accompaniments," and she struck the A key on the piano.

Imbued with the desire to make a good impression, and inspired by her faultless accompaniments, Broderick played with a brilliancy and fervor which astonished himself. Evelyn complimented him in the most cogent manner possible, by continually asking him to play more.

At the end of an exquisite Strauss waltz, she exclaimed, "Oh, wouldn't that be wonderful to dance to? I wish we could play and dance at the same time."

"Do you like to dance?"

"Indeed I do. I enjoy dancing better than any other form of amusement."

"There's the phonograph," he suggested.

"And we have the record of that very waltz. I'll start it while you roll up the rug."

A moment later, the phonograph began to send forth its regular cadences, and Eve fluttered into Broderick's arms. He was accustomed enough to the feel of a woman's body in close proximity to his, but Eve was unquestionably different. The fragrance of her hair, the gentle heaving of her womanly bosom, the touch of her fingers on his arm thrilled him with ecstatic, yet pure emotions.

And if she charmed him by her mere proximity, her incomparable skill as a dancer fascinated him. Though he danced with original abandon, following no set rules or conventional steps, she followed him as if her muscles were dominated synchronously by the same nerves which actuated his.

The great clock in the hall boomed out ten resonant strokes.

"The witching hour," smiled Eve, "I have a fairy godfather who is more exacting than Cinderella's godmother by two hours; and unless I obey him, I am in danger of losing the gifts he bestowed upon me."

Broderick took the hint and his departure.

The daily meetings soon became a matter of custom rather than appointment. Though her chess playing, her athletic prowess, her music, and her dancing had in turn attracted and charmed him, Broderick soon discovered that he enjoyed conversing with her most of all. There seemed to be no subject in literature, art, science or philosophy interesting to him, which was not at least passably familiar to Eve. He learned that she had been abroad for a year, and had a fluent command of French, German, Italian and Spanish.

One evening the talk turned to John Stuart Mill. "What is your idea of perfect happiness?" she asked.

Fervently he responded, "My idea of perfect happiness is to hold you in my arms and press my lips against yours."

Surprised and hurt by his seeming rudeness, she frowned, "Oh, you don't mean that. It's so unworthy of you."

Genuine contrition gripped him. "No, I didn't mean it exactly that way. But if you ask me to paint a picture of Paradise, it would include a little six-room bungalow, presided over by the one perfect woman in the world. There would be a lawn, and a garden, and two or three youngsters to rush out and meet me when I came home tired after the day's work."

"That's a little better."

"Oh, it's very commonplace, and rather lacking in ambition, I know, but I'm dreadfully selfish, and I think that the greatest happiness comes to a man through his own home and family. Now tell me what your idea of happiness is."

"Oh, I've had such lofty aspirations—altogether impossible and impractical, I fear. If I could only accomplish something really big—something which

would be a blessing to all humanity—like the invention of the radio, for instance, then I should indeed be happy. But, of course, that can never be. So I do the next best thing, and get all the pleasure I can out of working with my hands for those whom I love. Would you like to see my workshop?"

Anticipating his assent, she led the way to a small room at the rear of the building. "Here is *my* room. I consider it more characteristic of me than my sleeping chamber. Father won't let me have all the apparatus I'd like, for fear I'll injure some of my precious members, but I manage to do some work in brass and leather."

Broderick cast interested glances about the room. He was struck with the neat orderliness, which nevertheless did not seem to remove the impression that it was put to frequent use.

As Eve saw him stop to inspect an object lying on the bench, an involuntary cry escaped her. A second look explained the cause. The article was a card case of leather, beautifully embossed, and Broderick was astounded to see his own initials worked in the cover.

"Oh, I didn't want you to see that. I made it for you. To-morrow is your birthday."

"Why, so it is. I'd forgotten it myself. How in the world did you know?"

"I got it from the application blank you made out for father."

"It certainly was thoughtful of you. I wish I knew how to express my appreciation. May I keep it now?"

"Yes, with my best wishes."

"Thank you. And now I want to talk with you about a matter of great importance to both of us, something which we both must have had in mind right along, though we have scrupulously avoided mentioning it. You know what I mean?"

"You mean's father's proposal?"

"Yes, and I want to supplement it with a proposal of my own. First, let me tell you that I love you very, very much, so much that I can think of nothing else. Then I want to ask if you, of your own free will, without thought of the obligations you owe your foster-father, agree to the proposition he made me. In other words, do you wish me to submit to the operation which he proposes to perform on me?"

"Not unless you feel inclined to agree of *your* own free will."

"But I do feel so inclined. I'd do anything in the world for you, Eve."

"Then it will please me very much to have you do what father asks of you, otherwise I cannot marry you."

"And from now on, you and I are engaged?"

"Not yet. I have made a promise to father. Not until after—"

"I shall see him to-night, and tell him that the sooner he starts, the better it will please me."

Doctor Goddard had anticipated Broderick's decision almost to the minute. He had everything in readiness for the first operation, even to the man who was to provide the new member—a perfect right leg.

The scenes of the operating room were new to Broderick, who had not experienced a sick day since childhood. With undisguised interest he

watched the careful preparations; and when the sickening reek of ether reached his nostrils, he welcomed it as a harbinger of new experiences. Heavy, irresistible drowsiness slowly took possession of him; then he had the sensation of falling, or rather drifting through space; and finally came a thought-free void.

When he again recovered consciousness, he found himself lying on a bed in a many windowed room, which seemed filled to the bursting point with sunlight. Doctor Goddard was bending over him.

"How do you feel?"

"Oh, all right. Just a little dizzy and sick to my stomach."

"That will soon pass off. Does your leg ache?"

This was the first reminder of the reality of the operation. At first he was not sure that he had a right leg, and he had to feel with his hand to make certain. He was surprised at the touch of his bare skin, instead of the bandages he had expected. Very cautiously, he wriggled his great toe. It seemed to work very naturally.

"May I move my leg?" he asked.

"Surely. You can do anything you want with it."

Broderick elevated his knee, twisted his ankle, and began to kick like a man whose foot had fallen asleep. Then he threw back the covers of the bed and sat up.

"Try to walk on it," suggested the doctor; and Broderick complied, with the tread of a man suffering from a severe attack of the gout. Five minutes of cautious limping brought him to a chair. Here he sat down, and began to examine his right leg. With a puzzled expression on his face, he appealed to the doctor. "Do you know, that leg looks exactly like the one I've been using for the last twenty odd years?"

Goddard smiled. "It *is* the same one."

"You mean you didn't perform the operation?" Genuine disappointment was echoed by the question.

"No, I didn't undertake it. Get into your clothes, and I'll explain."

"First," the doctor continued, "I want to apologize to you and to confess that I have deceived you from the very start. Eve is not an adopted child but is my own natural daughter. Moreover, she is not perfect, though she comes as near to it as careful nurture and training could make a woman. As for my scheme for creating a perfect being, that was but a yarn invented for the occasion. It is accurate enough in theory, but I do not feel far enough advanced to undertake it in actual practice as yet.

"You naturally wonder what it is all about. To me, Eve's happiness is the most important consideration in the world; and I believe that she can only attain happiness through marriage with a man who is all that a man should be. There was just one thing concerning which I wanted to assure myself, and the story of the perfect woman was the last crucial test. This you have passed successfully, and you have convinced Eve and me that you possess the highest form of courage—the courage which prompts a man to risk life and limb in the interests of science and human achievement.

"Now, I suppose you would like to see Eve. You will find her in the

room where you first met her. And, before you go, perhaps it might interest you to know that the nude figure you saw that first day, was nothing but a life-sized oil painting, which was so well done and so skilfully lighted that it looked just like a living woman. No doubt you've heard of 'Stella' and similar illusions."

With a mumbled commonplace of some sort, Broderick left the room, and, his mind teeming with intoxicating, puzzling thoughts, strode along the corridor.

He found Eve clinging to the curtains through which she had first stepped into his life.

Anxiously she greeted him, "Has father told you?"

"Yes. Everything."

"And now that you know, what do you think of me?"

By way of answer, he gathered her up in his arms, and crushed his lips to hers in a fervid, suffocating kiss. "That is what I think of you," he panted. "I love you a million times more, now that I know that you are a real woman, and that every part of you is your own dear self."

"But I'm far from perfect."

"To me, you shall always be more than perfect—my superperfect bride."

"Are you sure you have no fault to find with me?"

"There have been only two things about you that I objected to. One was that you were supposed to be created in an unnatural way, but that, of course, is removed now. And the other—"

"Yes?"

"You don't mind if I tell you? The other was the dominating influence which your father seems to have over you."

"Father dominating me?" she laughed. "My, but that's rich! Why, I just twirl Father around my little finger. He does everything I tell him to. Listen. I met you once at a party, years and years ago. You don't remember, because I was a mere youngster and therefore beneath your notice. But I have never forgotten; and—well—the fact of the matter is that you were picked out, not by father, but by *me*!"

# Vulthoom

by Clark Ashton Smith

*Clark Ashton Smith's unparalleled imagination has roved the universe and pictured the stars and their multifold worlds. At times it has drawn itself in from the farther firmament to our own circle of solar planets and has lighted occasionally upon one of our visible neighbors. He has written two or three stories about the planet Mars, and he has pictured there a civilization besides which Egypt is an infantile upstart. Vulthoom is a novelette of Mars and of its ancient secrets. It is not a sequel to The Vaults of Yoh-Vombis, a better-known story, but it takes place in the same general locale.*

TO A cursory observer, it might have seemed that Bob Haines and Paul Septimus Chanler had little enough in common, other than the predicament of being stranded without funds on an alien world.

Haines, the third assistant pilot of an ether-liner, had been charged with insubordination by his superiors, and had been left behind in Ignarh, the commercial metropolis of Mars, and the port of all space-traffic. The charge against him was wholly a matter of personal spite; but so far, Haines had not succeeded in finding a new berth; and the month's salary paid to him at parting had been devoured with appalling swiftness by the piratic rates of the *Tellurian Hotel*.

Chanler, a professional writer of interplanetary fiction, had made a voyage to Mars to fortify his imaginative talent by a solid groundwork of observation and experience. His money had given out after a few weeks; and fresh supplies, expected from his publisher, had not yet arrived.

The two men, apart from their misfortunes, shared an illimitable curiosity concerning all things Martian. Their thirst for the exotic, their proclivity for wandering into places usually avoided by terrestrials, had drawn them together in spite of obvious differences of temperament, and had made them fast friends.

Trying to forget their worries, they had spent the past day in the queerly piled and huddled maze of old Ignarh, called by the Martians Ignar-Vath, on the eastern side of the great Yahan Canal. Returning at the sunset hour, and following the estrade of purple marble beside the water, they had nearly reached the mile-long bridge that would take them back to the modern city, Ignar-Luth, in which were the terrestrial consulates and shipping-offices and hotels.

It was the Martian hour of worship, when the Aihais gather in their roofless temples to implore the return of the passing sun. Like the throbbing



of feverish metal pulses, a sound of ceaseless and innumerable gongs punctured the thin air. The incredibly crooked streets were almost empty; and only a few barges, with immense rhomboidal sails of mauve and scarlet, crawled to and fro on the somber green waters.

The light waned with visible swiftness behind the top-heavy towers and pagoda-angled pyramids of Ignar-Luth. The chill of the coming night began to pervade the shadows of the huge solar gnomons that lined the canal at frequent intervals. The querulous clangors of the gongs died suddenly in Ignar-Vath, and left a weirdly whispering silence. The buildings of the immemorial city bulked enormous upon a sky blackish emerald that was already thronged with icy stars.

A medley of untraceable exotic odors was wafted through the twilight. The perfume was redolent of alien mystery, and it thrilled and troubled the Earthmen, who became silent as they approached the bridge, feeling the oppression of eery strangeness that gathered from all sides in the thickening gloom. More deeply than in daylight, they apprehended the muffled breathings and hidden, tortuous movements of a life for ever inscrutable to the children of other planets. The void between Earth and Mars had been traversed; but who could cross the evolutionary gulf between Earthmen and Martian?

The people were friendly enough in their taciturn way; they had tolerated the intrusion of terrestrials, had permitted commerce between the worlds. Their languages had been mastered, their history studied, by terrene savants. But it seemed that there could be no real interchange of ideas. Their civilization had grown old in diverse complexity before the foundering of Lemuria; its sciences, arts, religions, were hoary with inconceivable age; and even the simplest customs were the fruit of alien forces and conditions.

At that moment, faced with the precariousness of their situation, Haines and Chanler felt an actual terror of the unknown world that surrounded them with its measureless antiquity.

They quickened their paces. The wide pavement that bordered the canal was seemingly deserted; and the light, railless bridge itself was guarded only by the ten colossal statues of Martian heroes that loomed in warlike attitudes before the beginning of the first aerial span.

The Earthmen were somewhat startled when a living figure, little less gigantic than the carved images, detached itself from their deepening shadows and came forward with mighty strides.

The figure, nearly ten feet in height, was taller by a full yard than the average Aihai, but presented the familiar conformation of massively bulging chest and bony, many-angled limbs. The head was featured with high-flaring ears and pit-like nostrils that narrowed and expanded visibly in the twilight. The eyes were sunken in profound orbits, and were wholly invisible, save for tiny reddish sparks that appeared to burn suspended in the sockets of a skull. According to native customs, this bizarre personage was altogether nude; but a kind of circlet around the neck—a flat wire of curiously beaten silver—indicated that he was the servant of some noble lord.

Haines and Chanler were astounded, for they had never before seen a Martian of such prodigious stature. The apparition, it was plain, desired to intercept them. He paused before them on the pavement of blockless marble. They were even more amazed by the weirdly booming voice, reverberant as that of some enormous frog, with which he began to address them. In spite of the interminably guttural tones, the heavy slurring of certain vowels and consonants, they realized that the words were those of human language.

"My master summons you," bellowed the colossus. "Your plight is known to him. He will help you liberally, in return for a certain assistance which you can render him. Come with me."

"This sounds peremptory," murmured Haines. "Shall we go? Probably it's some charitable Aihai prince, who has gotten wind of our reduced circumstances. Wonder what the game is?"

"I suggest that we follow the guide," said Chanler, eagerly. "His proposition sounds like the first chapter of a thriller."

"All right," said Haines, to the towering giant. "Lead us to your master."

With strides that were moderated to match those of the Earthmen, the colossus led them away from the hero-guarded bridge and into the greenish-purple gloom that had inundated Ignar-Vath. Beyond the pavement, an alley yawned like a high-mouthed cavern between lightless mansions and warehouses whose broad balconies and jutting roofs were almost conterminous in midair. The alley was deserted; and the Aihai moved like an overgrown shadow through the dusk and paused shadow-like in a deep and lofty doorway. Halting at his heels, Chanler and Haines were aware of a shrill metallic stridor, made by the opening of the door, which, like all Martian doors, was drawn upward in the manner of a mediaeval portcullis. Their guide was silhouetted on the saffron light that poured from bosses of radio-active mineral set in the walls and roof of a circular ante-chamber. He preceded them, according to custom; and following, they saw that the room was unoccupied. The door descended behind them without apparent agency or manipulation.

To Chanler, gazing about the windowless chamber, there came the indefinable alarm that is sometimes felt in a closed space. Under the circumstances, there seemed to be no reason to apprehend danger or treachery; but all at once he was filled with a wild longing to escape.

Haines, on his part, was wondering rather perplexedly why the inner door was closed and why the master of the house had not already appeared to receive them. Somehow, the house impressed him as being uninhabited; there was something empty and desolate in the silence that surrounded them.

The Aihai, standing in the center of the bare, unfurnished room, had faced about as if to address the Earthmen. His eyes glowered inscrutably from their deep orbits; his mouth opened, showing double rows of snaggy teeth. But no sound appeared to issue from his moving lips; and the notes that he emitted must have belonged to that scale of overtones, beyond human audition, of which the Martian voice is capable. No doubt the mechanism

of the door had been actuated by similar overtones; and now, as if in response, the entire floor of the chamber, wrought of dark, seamless metal, began to descend slowly, as if dropping into a great pit. Haines and Chanler, startled, saw the saffron lights receding above them. They, together with the giant, were going down into shadow and darkness, in a broad circular shaft. There was a ceaseless grating and shrieking of metal, setting their teeth on edge with its insupportable pitch.

Like a narrowing cluster of yellow stars, the lights grew dim and small above them. Still their descent continued; and they could no longer discern each other's faces, or the face of the Aihai, in the ebon blackness through which they fell. Haines and Chanler were beset with a thousand doubts and suspicions, and they began to wonder if they had been somewhat rash in accepting the Aihai's invitation.

"Where are you taking us?" said Haines bluntly. "Does your master live underground?"

"We go to my master," replied the Martian with cryptic finality. "He awaits you."

The cluster of lights had become a single star, had dwindled and faded as if in the night of infinity. There was a sense of irredeemable depth, as if they had gone down to the very core of that alien world. The strangeness of their situation filled the Earthmen with increasing disquiet. They had committed themselves to a clueless mystery that began to savor of menace and peril. Nothing was to be learned from their conductor. No retreat was possible—and they were both weaponless.

The strident shrieking of metal slowed and sank to a sullen whine. The Earthmen were dazzled by the ruddy brilliance that broke upon them through a circle of slender pillars that had replaced the walls of the shaft. An instant more, while they went down through the flooding light, and then the floor beneath them became stationary. They saw that it was now part of the floor of a great cavern lit by crimson hemispheres embedded in the roof. The cavern was circular, with passages that ramified from it in every direction, like the spokes of a wheel from the hub. Many Martians, no less gigantic than the guide, were passing swiftly to and fro, as if intent on enigmatic errands. The strange, muted clangors and thunder-like rumblings of hidden machinery throbbed in the air, vibrated in the shaken floor.

"What do you suppose we've gotten into?" murmured Chanler. "We must be many miles below the surface. I've never heard of anything like this, except in some of the old Aihai myths. This place might be Ravormos, the Martian underworld, where Vulthoom, the evil god, is supposed to lie asleep for a thousand years amid his worshippers."

The guide had overheard him. "You have come to Ravormos," he boomed portentously. "Vulthoom is awake, and will not sleep again for another thousand years. It is he that has summoned you; and I take you now to the chamber of audience."

Haines and Chanler, dumbfounded beyond measure, followed the Martian from the strange elevator toward one of the ramifying passages.

"There must be some sort of foolery on foot," muttered Haines. "I've

heard of Vulthoom, too, but he's a mere superstition, like Satan. The up-to-date Martians don't believe in him nowadays; though I have heard that there is still a sort of devil-cult among the pariahs and low-castes. I'll wager that some noble is trying to stage a revolution against the reigning emperor, Cykor, and has established his quarters underground."

"That sounds reasonable," Chanler agreed. "A revolutionist might call himself Vulthoom: the trick would be true to the Aihai psychology. They have a taste for high-sounding metaphors and fantastic titles."

Both became silent, feeling a sort of awe before the vastness of the cavern-world whose litten corridors reached away on every hand. The surmises they voiced began to appear inadequate: the improbable was verified, the fabulous had become the factual, and was engulfing them more and more. The far, mysterious clangors, it seemed, were of preternormal origin; the hurrying giants who passed athwart the chamber with unknown burdens conveyed a sense of supernatural activity and enterprise. Haines and Chanler were both tall and stalwart, but the Martians about them were all nine or ten feet in height. Some were closer to eleven feet, and all were muscled in proportion. Their faces bore a look of immense, mummy-like age, incongruous with their agility and vigor.

Haines and Chanler were led along a corridor from whose arched roof the red hemispheres, doubtless formed of artificially radio-active metal, glared down at intervals like imprisoned suns. Leaping from step to step, they descended a flight of giant stairs, with the Martian striding easily before them. He paused at the open portals of a chamber hewn in the dark and basic adamantine stone.

"Enter," he said, and withdrew his bulk to let them pass.

The chamber was small but lofty, its roof rising like the interior of a spire. Its floor and walls were stained by the bloody violet beams of a single hemisphere far up in the narrowing dome. The place was vacant, and furnished only with a curious tripod of black metal, fixed in the center of the floor. The tripod bore an oval block of crystal, and from this block, as if from a frozen pool, a frozen flower lifted, opening petals of smooth, heavy ivory that received a rosy tinge from the strange light. Block, flower, tripod, it seemed, were the parts of a piece of sculpture.

Crossing the threshold, the Earthmen became instantly aware that the throbbing thunders and cave-reverberant clangors had ebbed away in profound silence. It was as if they had entered a sanctuary from which all sound was excluded by a mystic barrier. The portals remained open behind them. Their guide, apparently, had withdrawn. But, somehow, they felt that they were not alone, and it seemed that hidden eyes were peering upon them from the blank walls.

Perturbed and puzzled, they stared at the pale flower, noting the seven tongue-like petals that curled softly outward from a perforated heart like a small censer. Chanler began to wonder if it were really a carving, or an actual flower that had been mineralized through Martian chemistry. Then, startlingly, a voice appeared to issue from the blossom: a voice incredibly

sweet, clear and sonorous, whose tones, perfectly articulate, were neither those of Aihai nor Earthmen.

"I, who speak, am the entity known as Vulthoom," said the voice. "Be not surprised, or frightened: it is my desire to befriend you in return for a consideration which, I hope, you will not find impossible. First of all, however, I must explain certain matters that perplex you.

"No doubt you have heard the popular legends concerning me, and have dismissed them as mere superstitions. Like all myths, they are partly true and partly false. I am neither god nor demon, but a being who came to Mars from another universe in former cycles. Though I am not immortal, my span of life is far longer than that of any creature evolved by the worlds of your solar system. I am governed by alien biologic laws, with periods of alternate slumber and wakefulness that involve centuries. It is virtually true, as the Aihais believe, that I sleep for a thousand years and remain conscious continually for another thousand.

"At a time when your ancestors were still the blood-brothers of the ape, I fled from my own world to this intercosmic exile, banished by implacable foes. The Martians say that I fell from heaven like a fiery meteor; and the myth interprets the descent of my ether-ship. I found a matured civilization, immensely inferior, however, to that from which I came.

"The kings and hierarchs of the planet would have driven me away; but I gathered a few adherents, arming them with weapons superior to those of Martian science; and after a great war, I established myself firmly and gained other followers. I did not care to conquer Mars, but withdrew to this cavern-world in which I have dwelt ever since with my adherents. On these, for their faithfulness, I conferred a longevity that is almost equal to my own. To ensure this longevity, I have also given them the gift of a slumber corresponding to mine. They sleep and wake with me.

"We have maintained this order of existence for many ages. Seldom have I meddled in the doings of the surface-dwellers. They, however, have converted me into an evil god or spirit; though evil, to me, is a word without meaning.

"I am the possessor of many senses and faculties unknown to you or to the Martians. My perceptions, at will, can be extended over large areas of space, or even time. Thus I learned your predicament; and I have called you here with the hope of obtaining your consent to a certain plan. To be brief, I have grown weary of Mars, a senile world that draws near to death; and I wish to establish myself in a younger planet. The Earth would serve my purpose well. Even now, my followers are building the new ether-ship in which I propose to make the voyage.

"I do not wish to repeat the experience of my arrival in Mars by landing among a people ignorant of me and perhaps universally hostile. You, being Earthmen, could prepare many of your fellows for my coming, could gather proselytes to serve me. Your reward—and theirs—would be the elixir of longevity. And I have many other gifts . . . the precious gems and metals that you prize so highly. Also, there are the flowers, whose perfume is more seductive and persuasive than all else. Inhaling that perfume, you will

deem that even gold is worthless in comparison . . . and having breathed it, you, and all others of your kind, will serve me gladly."

The voice ended, leaving a vibration that thrilled the nerves of the listeners for some moments. It was like the cessation of a sweet, bewitching music with overtones of evil scarcely to be detected above the subtle melody. It bemused the senses of Haines and Chanler, lulling their astonishment into a sort of dreamy acceptance of the voice and its declarations.

Chanler made an effort to throw off the enchantment.

"Where are you?" he said. "And how are we to know that you have told us the truth?"

"I am near you," said the voice, "but I do not choose, at this time, to reveal myself. The proof of all that I have stated, however, will be revealed to you in due course. Before you is one of the flowers of which I have spoken. It is not, as you have perhaps surmised, a work of sculpture, but it is an antholite, or fossil blossom, brought, with others of the same kind, from the world to which I am native. Though scentless at ordinary temperatures, it yields a perfume under the application of heat. As to the perfume . . . you must judge for yourselves."

The air of the chamber had been neither warm nor cold. Now, the Earthmen were conscious of a change, as if hidden fires had been ignited. The warmth seemed to issue from the metal tripod and the block of crystal, beating upon Haines and Chanler like the radiation of some invisible tropic sun. It became ardent but not insupportable. At the same time, insidiously, the terrestrials began to perceive the perfume, which was like nothing they had ever inhaled. An elusive thread of other-world sweetness, it curled about their nostrils, deepening slowly but acceleratively to a spicy flood, and seeming to mix a pleasant coolness as of foliage-shaded air with the fervent heat.

Chanler was more vividly affected than Haines by the curious hallucinations that followed; though, apart from this differing degree of verisimilitude, their impressions were oddly alike. It seemed to Chanler, all at once, that the perfume was no longer wholly alien to him, but was something that he had remembered from other times and places. He tried to recall the circumstances of this prior familiarity, and his recollections, drawn up as if from the sealed reservoirs of an old existence, took the form of an actual scene that replaced the cavern-chamber about him. Haines was no part of this scene, but had disappeared from his ken, and the roof and walls had vanished, giving place to an open forest of fern-like trees. Their slim, pearly boles and tender frondage swarm in a luminous glory, like an Eden filled with the primal daybreak. The trees were tall, but taller still than they were the flowers that poured down from waving censers of carnal white an overwhelming and voluptuous perfume.

Chanler felt an indescribable ecstasy. It seemed that he had gone back to the fountains of time in the first world, and had drawn into himself inexhaustible life, youth and vigor from the glorious light and fragrance that had steeped his senses to their last nerve.

The ecstasy heightened, and he heard a singing that appeared to emanate from the mouths of the blossoms: a singing as of houris, that turned his

blood to a golden philtre-brew. In the delirium of his faculties, the sound was identified with the blossoms' odor. It rose in giddy rapture insuppressible; and he thought that the very flowers soared like flames, and the trees aspired toward them, and he himself was a blown fire that towered with the singing to attain some ultimate pinnacle of delight. The whole world swept upward in a tide of exaltation, and it seemed that the singing turned to articulate sound, and Chanler heard the words, "I am Vulthoom, and thou art mine from the beginning of worlds, and shalt be mine until the end. . . ."

He awoke under circumstances that might almost have been a continuation of the visionary imagery he had beheld under the influence of the perfume. He lay on a bed of short, curling grass the color of verd-antique, with enormous tiger-hued blossoms leaning about him, and a soft brilliance as of amber sunset filling his eyes between the trailing boughs of strange, crimson-fruited trees. Tardily, as he grew cognizant of his surroundings, he realized that the voice of Haines had awakened him, and saw that Haines was sitting near at hand on the curious sward.

"Say, aren't you ever coming out of it?" Chanler heard the crisp query as if through a film of dreams. His thoughts were bewildered, and his memories were oddly mixed with the pseudo-recollections, drawn as if from other lives, that had risen before him in his delirium. It was hard to disentangle the false from the real; but sanity returned to him by degrees; and with it came a feeling of profound exhaustion and nerve-weariness, which warned him that he had sojourned in the spurious paradise of a potent drug.

"Where are we now? and how did we get here?" he asked.

"As far as I can tell," returned Haines, "we're in a sort of underground garden. Some of those big Aihais must have brought us here after we succumbed to the perfume. I resisted the influence longer than you did; and I remember hearing the voice of Vulthoom as I went under. The voice said that he would give us forty-eight hours, terrestrial time, in which to think over his proposition. If we accept, he'll send us back to Ignarh with a fabulous sum of money—and a supply of those narcotic flowers."

Chanler was now fully awake. He and Haines proceeded to discuss their situation, but were unable to arrive at any definite conclusion. The whole affair was no less baffling than extraordinary. An unknown entity, naming himself after the Martian Devil, had invited them to become his terrestrial agents or emissaries. Apart from the spreading of a propaganda designed to facilitate his advent on Earth, they were to introduce an alien drug that was no less powerful than morphine, cocaine, or marihuana—and, in all likelihood, no less pernicious.

"What if we refuse?" said Chanler.

"Vulthoom said that it would be impossible to let us return, in that case. But he didn't specify our fate—merely hinted that it would be unpleasant."

"Well, Haines, we've got to think our way out of this, if we can."

"I'm afraid that thinking won't help us much. We must be many miles

below the surface of Mars—and the mechanism of the elevators, in all probability, is something that no Earthman could ever learn.”

Before Chanler could offer any comment, one of the giant Aihais appeared among the trees, carrying two of the curious Martian utensils known as *kulpai*. These were large platters of semi-metallic earthenware, fitted with removable cups and rotatory carafes, in which an entire meal of liquids and solids could be served. The Aihai set the platters on the ground before Haines and Chanler, and then waited, immobile and inscrutable. The Earthmen, conscious of a ravening hunger, addressed themselves to the foodstuffs, which had been molded or cut into various geometric forms. Though possibly of synthetic origin, the foods were delicious, and the Earthmen consumed them to the last cone and lozenge, and washed them down with a vinous garnet-colored liquor from the carafes.

When they had finished, their attendant spoke for the first time.

“It is the will of Vulthoom that you should wander throughout Ravormos and behold the wonders of the caverns. You are at liberty to roam alone and unattended; or, if you prefer, I shall serve you as a guide. My name is Ta-Vho-Shai, and I am ready to answer any questions that you ask. Also, you may dismiss me at will.”

Haines and Chanler, after a brief discussion, decided to accept this offer of ciceronage. They followed the Aihai through the garden, whose extent was hard to determine because of the misty amber luminance that filled it as if with radiant atoms, giving the impression of unbounded space. The light, they learned from Ta-Vho-Shai, was emitted by the lofty roof and walls beneath the action of an electro-magnetic force of wave-length shorter even than the cosmic rays; and it possessed all the essential qualities of sunlight.

The garden was composed of weird plants and blossoms, many of which were exotic to Mars, and had perhaps been imported from the alien solar system to which Vulthoom was native. Some of the flowers were enormous mats of petals, like a hundred orchids joined into one. There were cruciform trees, hung with fantastically long and variegated leaves that resembled heraldic pennons or scrolls of cryptic writing; and others were branched and fruited in outlandish ways.

Beyond the garden, they entered a world of open passages and chambered caverns, some of which were filled with machinery or with storage-vats and urns. In others, immense ingots of precious and semi-precious metals were piled, and gigantic coffers spilled their flashing gems as if to tempt the Earthmen.

Most of the machines were in action, though untended, and Haines and Chanler were told that they could run in this manner for centuries or millenarics. Their operation was inexplicable even to Haines with his expert knowledge of mechanics. Vulthoom and his people had gone beyond the spectrum, and beyond the audible vibrations of sound, and had compelled the hidden forces of the universe to appear and obey them.

Everywhere there was a loud beating as of metal pulses, a mutter as of prisoned Afrits and servile iron titans. Valves opened and shut with a harsh



clangor. There were rooms pillared with strident dynamos; and others where groups of mysteriously levitated spheres were spinning silently, like suns and planets in the void of space.

They climbed a flight of stairs, colossal as the steps of the pyramid of Cheops, to a higher level. Haines, in a dream-like fashion, seemed to remember descending these stairs, and thought they were now nearing the chamber in which he and Chanler had been interviewed by the hidden entity, Vulthoom. He was not sure, however; and Ta-Vho-Shai led them through a series of vast rooms that appeared to serve the purpose of laboratories. In most of these, there were age-old colossi, bending like alchemists over furnaces that burned with cold fire, and retorts that fumed with queer threads and ropes of vapor. One room was untenanted, and was furnished with no apparatus, other than three great bottles of clear, uncolored glass, taller than a tall man, and having somewhat the form of Roman amphoras. To all appearances the bottles were empty; but they were closed with double-handed stoppers that a human being could scarcely have lifted.

"What are these bottles?" Chanler asked the guide.

"They are the Bottles of Sleep," said the Aihai, with the solemn and sententious air of a lecturer. "Each of them is filled with a rare, invisible gas. When the time comes for the thousand-year slumber of Vulthoom, the gases are released; and mingling, they pervade the atmosphere of Ravormos, even to the lowest cavern, inducing sleep for a similar period in us who serve Vulthoom. Time no longer exists; and eons are no more than instants for the sleepers; and they awaken only at the hour of Vulthoom's awakening."

Haines and Chanler, filled with curiosity, were prompted to ask many questions, but most of these were answered vaguely and ambiguously by Ta-Vho-Shai, who seemed eager to continue his ciceronage through other and ulterior parts of Ravormos. He could tell them nothing about the chemical nature of the gases; and Vulthoom himself, if the veracity of Ta-Vho-Shai could be trusted, was a mystery even to his own followers, most of whom had never beheld him in person.

Ta-Vho-Shai conducted the Earthmen from the room of bottles, and down a long straight cavern, wholly deserted, where a rumbling and pounding as of innumerable engines came to meet them. The sound broke upon them like a Niagara of evil thunders when they emerged finally in a sort of pillared gallery that surrounded a mile-wide gulf illumined by the terrible flaring of tongued fires that rose incessantly from its depths.

It was as if they looked down into some infernal circle of angry light and tortured shadow. Far beneath, they saw a colossal structure of curved and glittering girders, like the strangely articulated bones of a metal behemoth outstretched along the bottom of the pit. Around it, furnaces belched like the flaming mouths of dragons; tremendous cranes went up and down perpetually with a motion as of long-necked plesiosaurs; and the figures of giants, red as laboring demons, moved through the sinister glare.

"They build the ether-ship in which Vulthoom will voyage to the Earth," said Ta-Vho-Shai. "When all is ready, the ship will blast its way to the sur-

face by means of atomic disintegrators. The very stone will melt before it like vapor. Ignar-Luth, which lies directly above, will be consumed as if the central fires of the planet had broken loose."

Haines and Chanler, appalled, could offer no rejoinder. More and more they were stunned by the mystery and magnitude, the terror and menace, of this unsuspected cavern-world. Here, they felt, a malign power, armed with untold arcana of science, was plotting some baleful conquest; a doom that might involve the peopled worlds of the system was being incubated in secrecy and darkness. They, it seemed, were helpless to escape and give warning, and their own fate was shadowed by insoluble gloom.

A gust of hot, metallic vapor, mounting from the abyss, burned corrosively in their nostrils as they peered from the gallery's verge. Ill and giddy, they drew back.

"What lies beyond this gulf?" Chanler inquired, when his sickness had passed.

"The gallery leads to outer caverns, little used, which conduct on the dry bed of an ancient underground river. This river-bed, running for many miles, emerges in a sunken desert far below sea-level, and lying to the west of Ignarh."

The Earthmen started at this information, which seemed to offer them a possible avenue of escape. Both, however, thought it well to dissemble their interest. Pretending fatigue, they asked the Aihai to lead them to some chamber in which they could rest awhile and discuss Vulthoom's proposition at leisure.

Ta-Vho-Shai, professing himself at their service in all ways, took them to a small room beyond the laboratories. It was a sort of bed-chamber, with two tiers of couches along the walls. These couches, from their length, were evidently designed to accommodate the giant Martians. Here Haines and Chanler were left alone by Ta-Vho-Shai, who had tacitly inferred that his presence was no longer needed.

"Well," said Chanler, "it looks as if there were a chance of escape if we can only reach that river-bed. I took careful note of the corridors we followed on our return from the gallery. It should be easy enough—unless we are being watched without our knowledge."

"The only trouble is, it's too easy. . . . But anyway, we can try. Anything would be better than waiting around like this. After what we've seen and heard, I'm beginning to believe that Vulthoom really is the Devil—even though he doesn't claim to be."

"Those ten-foot Aihais give me the creeps," said Chanler. "I can readily believe they are a million years old, or thereabouts. Enormous longevity would account for their size and stature. Most animals that survive beyond the normal term of years become gigantic; and it stands to reason that these Martian men would develop in a similar fashion."

It was a simple matter to retrace their route to the pillared gallery that encircled the great abyss. For most of the distance, they had only to follow a main corridor; and the sound of the rumbling engineerings alone would have guided them. They met no one in the passages; and the Aihais that

they saw through open portals in laboratory rooms were deeply intent on enigmatic chemistries.

"I don't like this," muttered Haines. "It's too good to be true."

"I'm not so sure of that. Perhaps it simply hasn't occurred to Vulthoom and his followers that we might try to escape. After all, we know nothing about their psychology."

Keeping close to the inner wall, behind the thick pillars, they followed the long, slowly winding gallery on the right hand. It was lit only by the shuddering reflection of the tall flames in the pit below. Moving thus, they were hidden from the view of the laboring giants, if any of these had happened to look upward. Poisonous vapors were blown toward them at intervals, and they felt the hellish heat of the furnaces; and the clangors of welding, the thunder of obscure machineries, beat upon them as they went with reverberations that were like hammer-blows.

By degrees they rounded the gulf, and came at last to its further side, where the gallery curved backward in its return toward the entrance corridor. Here, in the shadows, they discerned the unlit mouth of a large cavern that radiated from the gallery.

This cavern, they surmised, would lead them toward the sunken riverbed of which Ta-Vho-Shai had spoken. Haines, luckily, carried a small pocket-flash, and he turned its ray into the cavern, revealing a straight corridor with numerous minor intersections. Night and silence seemed to swallow them at a gulp, and the clangors of the toiling Titans were quickly and mysteriously muted as they hurried along the empty hall.

The roof of the corridor was fitted with metal hemispheres, now dark and rayless, that had formerly served to illuminate it in the same fashion as the other halls of Ravormos. A fine dust was stirred by the feet of the Earthmen as they fled; and soon the air grew chill and thin, losing the mild and somewhat humid warmth of the central caverns. It was plain, as Ta-Vho-Shai had told them, that these outer passages were seldom used or visited.

It seemed that they went on for a mile or more in that Tartarean corridor. Then the walls began to straiten, the floor roughened and fell steeply. There were no more cross-passages, and hope quickened in the Earthmen as they saw plainly that they had gone beyond the artificial caverns into a natural tunnel. The tunnel soon widened, and its floor became a series of self-formations. By means of these, they descended into a profound abyss that was obviously the river-channel of which Ta-Vho-Shai had told them.

The small flashlight barely sufficed to reveal the full extent of this underground waterway, in which there was no longer even a trickle of its prehistoric flood. The bottom, deeply eroded, and riddled with sharp boulders, was more than a hundred yards wide; and the roof arched into gloom irresoluble. Exploring the bottom tentatively for a little distance, Haines and Chanler determined by its gradual falling the direction in which the stream had flowed. Following this downward course, they set out resolutely, praying that they would find no impassable barriers, no precipices of former

cataracts to impede or prevent their egress in the desert. Apart from the danger of pursuit, they apprehended no other difficulties than these.

The obscure windings of the bottom brought them first to one side and then to the other as they groped along. In places the cavern widened, and they came to far-recessive beaches, terraced, and marked by the ebbing waters. High up on some of the beaches, there were singular formations resembling a type of mammoth fungi grown in caverns beneath the modern canals. These formations, in the shape of Herculean clubs, arose often to a height of three feet or more. Haines, impressed by their metallic sparkling beneath the light as he flashed it upon them, conceived a curious idea. Though Chanler protested against the delay, he climbed the shelving to examine a group of them more closely, and found, as he had suspected, that they were not living growths, but were petrified and heavily impregnated with minerals. He tried to break one of them loose, but it resisted all his tuggings. However, by hammering it with a loose fragment of stone, he succeeded in fracturing the base of the club, and it toppled over with an iron tinkling. The thing was very heavy, with a mace-like swelling at the upper end, and would make a substantial weapon in case of need. He broke off a second club for Chanler; and thus armed, they resumed their flight.

It was impossible to calculate the distance that they covered. The channel turned and twisted, it pitched abruptly in places, and was often broken into ledges that glittered with alien ores or were stained with weirdly brilliant oxides or azure, vermilion and yellow. The men floundered ankle-deep in pits of sable sand, or climbed laboriously over damlike barricades of rusty boulders, huge as piled menhirs. Ever and anon, they found themselves listening feverishly for any sound that would betoken pursuit. But silence brimmed the Cimmerian channel, troubled only by the clatter and crunch of their own footsteps.

At last, with incredulous eyes, they saw before them the dawning of a pale light in the further depths. Arch by dismal arch, like the throat of Avernus lit by nether fires, the enormous cavern became visible. For one exultant moment, they thought that they were nearing the channel mouth; but the light grew with an ery and startling brilliance, like the flaming of furnaces rather than sunshine falling into a cave. Implacable, it crept along the walls and bottom and dimmed the ineffectual beam of Haines' torch as it fell on the dazzled Earthmen.

Ominous, incomprehensible, the light seemed to watch and threaten. They stood amazed and hesitant, not knowing whether to go on or retreat. Then, from the flaming air, a voice spoke as if in gentle reproof: the sweet, sonorous voice of Vulthoom.

"Go back as you came, O Earthlings. None may leave Ravormos without my knowledge or against my will. Behold! I have sent my Guardians to escort you."

The lit air had been empty to all seeming, and the river-bed was peopled only by the grotesque masses and squat shadows of boulders. Now, with the ceasing of the voice, Haines and Chanler saw before them, at a distance

of ten feet, the instant apparition of two creatures that were comparable to nothing in the whole known zoology of Mars or Earth.

They rose from the rocky bottom to the height of giraffes, with shortish legs that were vaguely similar to those of Chinese dragons, and elongated spiral necks like the middle coils of great anacondas. Their heads were triple-faced, and they might have been the trimurti of some infernal world. It seemed that each face was eyeless, with tongue-shapen flames issuing voluminously from deep orbits beneath the slanted brows. Flames also poured in a ceaseless vomit from the gaping gargoyle mouths. From the head of each monster a triple comb of vermilion flared aloft in sharp serrations, glowing terribly; and both of them were bearded with crimson scrolls. Their necks and arching spines were fringed with sword-long blades that diminished into rows of daggers on the tapering tails; and their whole bodies, as well as this fearsome armament, appeared to burn as if they had just issued from a fiery furnace.

A palpable heat emanated from these hellish chimeras, and the Earthmen retreated hastily before the flying splotches, like the blown tatters of a conflagration, that broke loose from their ever-jetting eye-flames and mouth-flames.

"My God! These monsters are supernatural!" cried Chanler, shaken and appalled.

Haines, though palpably startled, was inclined to a more orthodox explanation. "There must be some sort of television behind this," he maintained, "though I can't imagine how it's possible to project three-dimensional images, and also create the sensation of heat. . . . I had an idea, somehow, that our escape was being watched."

He picked up a heavy fragment of metallic stone and heaved it at one of the glowing chimeras. Aimed unerringly, the fragment struck the frontal brow of the monster, and seemed to explode in a shower of sparks at the moment of impact. The creature flared and swelled prodigiously, and a fiery hissing became audible. Haines and Chanler were driven back by a wave of scorching heat; and their wardens followed them pace by pace on the rough bottom. Abandoning all hope of escape, they returned toward Ravormos, dogged by the monsters as they toiled through yielding sand and over the ledges and ripples.

Reaching the point where they had descended into the river-channel, they found its upper stretches guarded by two more of these terrific dragons. There was no other recourse than to climb the loftly shelves into the acclivitous tunnel. Weary with their long flight, and enervated by a dull despair, they found themselves again in the outer hall, with two of their guardians now preceding them like an escort of infernal honor. Both were stunned by a realization of the awful and mysterious powers of Vulthoom; and even Haines had become silent, though his brain was still busy with a futile and desperate probing. Chanler, more sensitive, suffered all the chills and terrors that his literary imagination could inflict upon him under the circumstances.

They came at length to the columned gallery that circled the vast abyss.

Midway in this gallery, the chimeras who preceded the Earthmen turned upon them suddenly with a fearsome belching of flames; and, as they paused in their intimidation, the two behind continued to advance toward them with a hissing as of Satanic salamanders. In that narrowing space, the heat was like a furnace-blast, and the columns afforded no shelter. From the gulf below, where the Martian titans toiled perpetually, a stupefying thunder rose to assail them at the same time; and noxious fumes were blown toward them in writhing coils.

"Looks as if they are going to drive us into the gulf," Haines panted, as he sought to draw breath in the fiery air. He and Chanler reeled before the looming monsters, and even as he spoke, two more of these hellish apparitions flamed into being at the gallery's verge, as if they had risen from the gulf to render impossible that fatal plunge which alone could have offered an escape from the others.

Half swooning, the Earthmen were dimly aware of a change in the menacing chimeras. The flaming bodies dulled and shrank and darkened, the heat lessened, the fires died down in the mouths and eye-pits. At the same time the creatures drew closer, fawning loathsomely, and revealing whitish tongues and eyeballs of jet.

The tongues seemed to divide . . . they grew paler . . . they were like flower-petals that Haines and Chanler had seen somewhere. The breath of the chimeras, like a soft gale, was upon the faces of the Earthmen . . . and the breath was a cool and spicy perfume that they had known before . . . the narcotic perfume that had overcome them following their audience with the hidden master of Ravormos. . . . Moment by moment, the monsters turned to prodigious blossoms; the pillars of the gallery became gigantic trees in a glamor of primal dawn; the thunders of the pit were lulled to a far-off sighing as of gentle seas on Edenic shores. The teeming terrors of Ravormos, the threat of a shadowy doom, were as things that had never been. Haines and Chanler, oblivious, were lost in the paradise of the unknown drug. . . .

Haines, awakening darkly, found that he lay on the stone floor in the circling colonnade. He was alone, and the fiery chimeras had vanished. The shadows of his opiate swoon were roughly dissipated by the clangors that still mounted from the neighboring gulf. With growing consternation and horror, he recalled everything that had happened.

He arose giddily to his feet, peering about in the semi-twilight of the gallery for some trace of his companion. The petrified fungus-club that Chanler had carried, as well as his own weapon, were lying where they had fallen from the fingers of the overpowered men. But Chanler was gone; and Haines shouted aloud with no other response than the eerily prolonged echoes of the deep arcade.

Impelled by an urgent feeling that he must find Chanler without delay, he recovered his heavy mace and started along the gallery. It seemed that the weapon could be of little use against the preternatural servants of Vulthoom; but somehow, the metallic weight of the bludgeon reassured him.

Nearing the great corridor that ran to the core of Ravormos, Haines was

overjoyed when he saw Chanler coming to meet him. Before he could call out a cherry greeting, he heard Chanler's voice:

"Hello, Bob, this is my first televisual appearance in tridimensional form. Pretty good, isn't it? I'm in the private laboratory of Vulthoom, and Vulthoom has persuaded me to accept his proposition. As soon as you've made up your mind to do likewise, we'll return to Ignarh with full instructions regarding our terrestrial mission, and funds amounting to a million dollars each. Think it over, and you'll see that there's nothing else to do. When you've decided to join us, follow the main corridor through Ravormos, and Ta-Vho-Shai will meet you and bring you into the laboratory."

At the conclusion of this astounding speech, the figure of Chanler, without seeming to wait for any reply from Haines, stepped lightly to the gallery's verge and floated out among the wreathing vapors. There, smiling upon Haines, it vanished like a phantom.

To say that Haines was thunderstruck would be putting it feebly indeed. In all verisimilitude, the figure and voice had been those of the flesh-and-blood Chanler. He felt an icky chill before the thaumaturgy of Vulthoom, which could bring about a projection so veridical as to deceive him in this manner. He was shocked and horrified beyond measure by Chanler's capitulation; but somehow, it did not occur to him that any imposture had been practiced.

"That devil has gotten him," thought Haines. "But I'd never have believed it. I didn't think he was that kind of a fellow at all."

Sorrow, anger, bafflement and amazement filled him alternately as he strode along the gallery; nor, as he entered the inner hall, was he able to decide on any clearly effective course of action. To yield, as Chanler had avowedly done, was unthinkable repugnant to him. If he could see Chanler again, perhaps he could persuade him to change his mind and resume an unflinching opposition to the alien entity. It was a degradation, and a treason to humankind, for any Earthman to lend himself to the more than doubtful schemes of Vulthoom. Apart from the projected invasion of Earth, and the spread of the strange, subtle narcotic, there was the ruthless destruction of Ignar-Luth that would occur when Vulthoom's ether-vessel should blast its way to the planet's surface. It was his duty, and Chanler's, to prevent all this if prevention were humanly possible. Somehow, they—or he alone if necessary—must stem the cavern-incubated menace. Bluntly honest himself, there was no thought of temporizing even for an instant.

Still carrying the mineraloid club, he strode on for several minutes, his brain preoccupied with the dire problem but powerless to arrive at any solution. Through a habit of observation more or less automatic with the veteran space-pilot, he peered through the doorways of the various rooms that he passed, where the cupels and retorts of a foreign chemistry were tended by age-old colossi. Then, without premeditation, he came to the deserted room in which were the three mighty receptacles that Ta-Vho-Shai had called the Bottles of Sleep. He remembered what the Aihai had said concerning their contents.

In a flash of desperate inspiration, Haines boldly entered the room hoping

that he was not under the surveillance of Vulthoom at the moment. There was no time for reflection or other delay, if he were to execute the audacious plan that had occurred to him.

Taller than his head, with the swelling contours of great amphoras, and seemingly empty, the Bottles glimmered in the still light. Like the phantom of a bulbous giant, he saw his own distorted image in the upward-curving glass as he neared the foremost one.

There was but one thought, one resolution, in his mind. Whatever the cost, he must smash the Bottles, whose released gases would pervade Ravormos and plunge the followers of Vulthoom—if not Vulthoom himself—into a thousand-year term of slumber. He and Chanler, no doubt, would be doomed to share the slumber; and for them, unfortified by the secret elixir of immortality, there would be in all likelihood no awakening. But under the circumstances it was better so; and, by the sacrifice, a thousand years of grace would be accorded to the two planets. Now was his opportunity, and it seemed improbable that there would ever be another one.

He lifted the petrified fungus-mace, he swung it back in a swift arc, and struck with all his strength at the bellying glass. There was a gong-like clangor, sonorous and prolonged, and radiating cracks appeared from top to bottom of the huge receptacle. At the second blow, it broke inward with a shrill, appalling sound that was almost an articulate shriek, and Haines' face was fanned for an instant by a cool breath, gentle as a woman's sigh.

Holding his breath to avoid the inhalation of the gas, he turned to the next Bottle. It shattered at the first stroke, and again he felt a soft sighing, that followed upon the cleavage.

A voice of thunder seemed to fill the room as he raised his weapon to assail the third Bottle: "Fool! you have doomed yourself and your fellow Earthman by this deed." The last words mingled with the crash of Haines' final stroke. A tomb-like silence followed, and the far-off, muted rumble of engineries seemed to ebb and recede before it. The Earthman stared for a moment at the riven Bottles, and then, dropping the useless remnant of his mace, which had been shattered into several fragments, he fled from the chamber.

Drawn by the noise of breakage, a number of Aihais had appeared in the hall. They were running about in an aimless, unconcerted manner, like mummies impelled by a failing galvanism. None of them tried to intercept the Earthman.

Whether the slumber induced by the gases would be slow or swift in its coming, Haines could not surmise. The air of the caverns was unchanged as far as he could tell: there was no odor, no perceptible effect on his breathing. But already, as he ran, he felt a slight drowsiness, and a thin veil appeared to weave itself on all his senses. It seemed that faint vapors were forming in the corridor, and there was a touch of insubstantiality in the very walls.

His flight was without definite goal or purpose. Like a dreamer in a dream, he felt little surprise when he found himself lifted from the floor and borne along through midair in an inexplicable levitation. It was as if he were caught in a rushing stream, or were carried on invisible clouds. The



doors of a hundred secret rooms, the mouths of a hundred mysterious halls, flew swiftly past him, and he saw in brief glimpses the colossi that lurched and nodded with the ever-spreading slumber as they went to and fro on strange errands. Then, dimly, he saw that he had entered the high-vaulted room that enshrined the fossil flower on its tripod of crystal and black metal. A door opened in the seamless stone of the further wall as he hurtled toward it. An instant more, while he seemed to fall downward through a nether chamber beyond, among prodigious masses of unnamable machines, upon a revolving disk that droned infernally; then he was deposited on his feet, with the whole chamber righting itself about him, and the disk towering before him. The disk had now ceased to revolve, but the air still throbbed with its hellish vibration. The place was like a mechanical nightmare, but amid its confusion of glittering coils and dynamos, Haines beheld the form of Chanler, lashed upright with metal cords to a rack-like frame. Near him, in a still and standing posture, was the giant Ta-Vho-Shai; and immediately in front of him, there reclined an incredible thing whose further portions and members wound away to an indefinite distance amid the machinery.

Somehow, the thing was like a gigantic plant, with innumerable roots, pale and swollen, that ramified from a bulbular bole. This bole, half hidden from view, was topped with a vermilion cup like a monstrous blossom; and from the cup there grew an elfin figure, pearly-hued, and formed with exquisite beauty and symmetry; a figure that turned its Lilliputian face toward Haines and spoke in the sounding voice of Vulthoom:

"You have conquered for the time, but I bear no rancor toward you. I blame my own carelessness."

To Haines, the voice was like a far-off thunder heard by one who is half asleep. With halting effort, lurching as if he were about to fall, he made his way toward Chanler. Wan and haggard, with a look that puzzled Haines dimly, Chanler gazed upon him from the metal frame without speaking.

"I . . . smashed the Bottles," Haines heard his own voice with a feeling of drowsy unreality. "It seemed the only thing to do . . . since you had gone over to Vulthoom."

"But I hadn't consented," Chanler replied slowly. "It was all a deception . . . to trick you into consenting. . . . And they were torturing me because I wouldn't give in." Chanler's voice trailed away, and it seemed that he could say no more. Subtly, the pain and haggardness began to fade from his features, as if erased by the gradual oncoming of slumber.

Haines, laboriously trying to comprehend through his own drowsiness, perceived an evil-looking instrument, like a many-pointed metal goad, which drooped from the fingers of Ta-Vho-Shai. From the arc of needle-like tips, there fell a ceaseless torrent of electric sparks. The bosom of Chanler's shirt had been torn open, and his skin was stippled with tiny blue-black marks from chin to diaphragm . . . marks that formed a diabolic pattern. Haines felt a vague, unreal horror.

Through the Lethe that closed upon his senses more and more, he became aware that Vulthoom had spoken; and after an interval, it seemed that he understood the meaning of the words. "All my methods of persuasion have

failed; but it matters little. I shall yield myself to slumber, though I could remain awake if I wished, defying the gases through my superior science and vital power. We shall all sleep soundly . . . and a thousand years are no more than a single night to my followers and me. For you, whose life-term is so brief, they will become—eternity. Soon I shall awaken and resume my plans of conquest . . . and you, who dared to interfere, will lie beside me then as a little dust . . . and the dust will be swept away."

The voice ended, and it seemed that the elfin being began to nod in the monstrous vermilion cup. Haines and Chanler saw each other with growing, wavering dimness, as if through a gray mist that had risen between them. There was silence everywhere, as if the Tartarean engineeries had fallen still, and the titans had ceased their labor. Chanler relaxed on the torture-frame, and his eyelids drooped. Haines tottered, fell, and lay motionless. Ta-Vho-Shai, still clutching his sinister instrument, reposed like a mummied giant. Slumber, like a silent sea, had filled the caverns of Ravormos.

# The Man Who Discovered Nothing

by Ray Cummings

*You have encountered Ray Cummings' famous character, Tubby, before. He appeared originally in a group of short stories illustrating basic principles of science, stories written at the very beginning of Ray Cummings' highly productive career. One of these stories was included in Avon Fantasy Reader No. 14. Another appears in the new anthology Every Boy's Book of Science-Fiction (Published by Frederick Fell). Tubby was once even featured in a full-length novel, oft-reprinted, called Around the Universe. Here he is now in an adventure never previously reprinted dealing with a very strange scientist indeed.*

"**T**HAT ain't so," shouted Tubby, bringing his fist down on the board table with a thump that made the mugs dance. "That ain't so, no-how."

"And then he says," went on his friend, ignoring the interruption, "as how no matter how small things get, something else is always smaller."

"Don't sound reasonable to me," said the third man. There were four of them altogether, seated around a little wooden table in the dingy room.

The fourth man dropped his cigar-butt carefully on the floor and sat up with dignity. "This here argument ain't got no sense," he began. "In the first place when things get so small you can't see them, nobody can't never tell how big they are. Ain't that so?" He paused impressively.

"Right," said Tubby.

"And lastly," continued the fourth man, "you can't get anything smaller than the littlest thing there is, nohow. Besides, when it gets so small you can't see it then it don't make no difference how big it is. Am I right?"

"Right," said Tubby.

"He said," went on the first man, "as how smallness is infinite. That's what he said, nothin' gets so small but what somethin' else is smaller. That's how he said it, 'smallness is infinite.' He dwelt upon the phrase lovingly.

"Tain't so," said Tubby. Then he rose suddenly, jerking his fat little body erect and standing rigid, with the tips of his fingers resting on the table.

"Friends, listen," he began grandiloquently, "this here argument's all wrong. It—it ain't right. What's the smallest thing you ever heard of?" he suddenly asked aggressively.

"Well, what is?" said the first man, on the defensive in spite of himself.

"A microbe," said Tubby triumphantly, "A microbe, ain't that it?" Nobody answered him.

"Now then," said Tubby, "if a microbe's the smallest thing there is, why then ain't the smallest microbe that ever lived the smallest thing of all? Answer me that, ain't it?" He collapsed abruptly in his chair, and glared at his companions.

"Let's play cards," said the second man.

Tubby's face changed at the confusion brought by this sudden introduction of a new idea. "Not me," he said. "You play."

Then he rose and wandered across the room to a larger chair in the corner. As he settled back with a luxurious sigh he suddenly remembered his argument. He threw up his head and blinked at his friends through the smoke.

"The smallest microbe—" he began loudly.

The first man looked up from dealing the cards. "Aw, forget it," he said.

"The smallest microbe—" persisted Tubby aggressively.

Then he gasped and stopped with his mouth open, his eyes staring. Standing before him was a shriveled-up little man, dressed all in black. On his head was a huge black plug hat, battered and worn. His livid face was long and solemn; his big, colorless eyes stared at Tubby unblinking.

"I want to talk to you," said the stranger in a low, mysterious voice.

Tubby swallowed hard.

"Yes," he whispered.

The little man sat beside Tubby, and on the table before them he placed a tiny black leather bag. Tubby had not noticed the bag before.

"I want to talk to you," repeated the stranger. Tubby opened his mouth; then closed it again.

"I'm a professor," continued the stranger. "My name is Trandar Robinar."

Tubby gulped again. "Mine's Tubby," he said. "Pleased to meet you."

"I know who you are," said the professor. "I came to see you."

"Me?" said Tubby.

The professor took off his hat and laid it on the table beside the little bag. Tubby noticed his gray hair was thin and scraggly.

"You're a wonderful man," said the professor. "So am I. We're both wonderful men. That's why I came to see you," he added confidentially, hitching his chair closer.

Tubby brightened. "Pleased to meet you," he repeated, holding out his hand. The professor shook it limply. Tubby shivered at his clammy touch.

"I'm going to be very famous soon," said the professor. "So are you. We're going to be famous together. Because you're going to help me."

Tubby leaned forward. His eyes were shining. "How?" he asked breathlessly.

The professor paused impressively. "I have made a great discovery," he said finally. "A greater discovery than was ever made before, since the beginning of the world."

Tubby held his breath. "What?" he managed to say when the professor stopped speaking.

"This discovery," went on the professor, tapping the table with his fingers—Tubby noticed the nails were very long and pointed—"this discovery is so unthinkable, the world will stand aghast when we tell it. We're going to get rich. You're going to help me."

"How?" said Tubby again.

The professor took up his black bag and opened it slowly. Tubby stopped breathing, his eyes bulging.

From the bag the professor took a little white glass vial about three inches long. In the cork was a tiny silver tube running down into the bottle. Above the cork the tube branched into two, one part ending in a pointed nozzle, the other having attached a little black rubber pipe and a small black bulb, like an atomizer. At the branching of the tube was a tiny silver stock-cock.

The professor held this contrivance lovingly in his hand a moment. Then he dangled it before Tubby's nose. Tubby shrank back.

"That bottle," said the professor slowly, "contains my discovery."

Tubby blinked at it, but found no words to say.

"Look at it carefully," said the professor, "it is the most wonderful thing in the world this minute." Tubby looked.

"What do you think is in that bottle?" asked the professor. Tubby looked harder, apparently the vial was empty.

"That don't look like nothin'," said Tubby.

"But that's just what it is," said the professor.

Tubby pondered this carefully a moment.

"What is what?" he asked finally.

The professor frowned. "That *is* Nothing," he said with emphasis, "and I have found it."

Tubby waited, blinking solemnly like an owl.

"You are not a man of great imagination, I see," continued the professor. "I shall have to tell you—from the beginning."

"But—" began Tubby.

"When I was a little boy," went on the professor, unheeding, "years ago, I began my search for the infinitely small. All these years I have delved and delved into smallness. And at last I have reached my goal—the bottom of the abyss—the absolute zero of littleness. And I have it there in that bottle."

"But—" began Tubby again.

"The infinitely small," droned the professor, "the absolute, concrete entity of nothing—the most marvelous discovery since the creation of the world—it's in that bottle."

Tubby's jaw dropped; his eyes seemed popping from his head as he stared at the professor's solemn face.

"In that bottle," went on the professor slowly, "with wonderful patience I have isolated and imprisoned all the Nothingness in the universe."

There was a long pause. Tubby gulped hard. Then he plucked up his courage. "How—how much of it is there?" he managed to ask.

The professor laid down the vial.

"An infinite amount," he answered. "I have gathered it bit by bit from everywhere. There is no Nothingness left in the universe now. It is all

compressed into that bottle. I see you do not understand," he added as Tubby continued staring.

"Yes—no," said Tubby.

"I shall explain—everything," said the professor.

"By this great discovery," he went on after a moment, "I have captured from the world and all the stars of the universe all the Nothingness they possessed. I have captured it all, and made it my slave. It has a wonderful power, this Nothingness. It will make us both rich. That is where you are going to help me. Watch carefully."

He took the vial in his hand and turned the tiny stop-cock. "Listen," he said softly, and squeezed the bulb. Tubby heard a very faint hissing sound.

"That is some of the Nothingness escaping," said the professor. "Now watch." He began squeezing the bulb again, aiming the nozzle at the little black bag on the table. Slowly the bag seemed to fade away, and in a moment it was gone.

"When the Nothingness comes out of that bottle, whatever it touches it turns to Nothing. Now do you understand?"

"No—yes," said Tubby.

"It is because of this wonderful power, I have brought it to you," said the professor. "You are going to help me make money out of it. Don't you see, with this we can wipe out anything in the world?"

"Suppose a man wants to be rid of some one else. A little of this, and the other person is gone—vanished into the realm of Nothingness. Think of what people will pay for that!" Tubby's eyes were glistening with cupidity.

"I am a scientist—not a business man; *you* will be the business man. We will divide the profits."

"Right," said Tubby at last.

"This Nothingness can do other wonderful things," continued the professor. "For instance, it can wipe out thoughts. How much is two and two?"

"Four," said Tubby.

"Think of No. 4—think hard. Now, you see, I turn this valve almost off. We only want a little Nothingness for this experiment."

He turned the stop-cock as he spoke. Then he raised the vial to Tubby's head, pressing the point of the nozzle against his temple. Tubby winced.

"I won't hurt you," said the professor. "Think hard—No. 4, is that it?"

"No. 4—right," said Tubby.

The professor squeezed the bulb a very little. Then he turned the stop-cock on full again, and laid the vial on the table.

"Now, then," he said, "what number was it you were thinking of?" Tubby wrinkled up his forehead, but said nothing.

"What number?"

"Number—number—I don't know," faltered Tubby.

"But you do remember you were thinking of some number?" persisted the professor.

"Yes," said Tubby, "but it ain't there now."

"You've forgotten it," said the professor. "That thought has gone into

the realm of Nothingness. It will never come back. That's because I used just the right amount of Nothing.

"Don't you see? That was the last thought in your mind; it was the easiest to wipe out. If I had used more Nothingness you would have lost other thoughts—those you had a few moments ago, for instance. The most recent always go first. Now do you understand?"

"Yes," said Tubby. "But—"

"But what?" asked the professor.

"But ain't it funny," said Tubby, "why my head didn't turn to nothin', too, when you squirted that bottle at it? That ain't right now, is it?"

The professor smiled. "You are a clever man. I always knew you were. But, you see, I had the *point* of the nozzle pressed against your temple. The Nothingness only works as it sprays out. It could not spray out until it got inside your brain. If I wanted to annihilate your head I would spray it from further away."

"Oh," said Tubby.

"So, you see," continued the professor, still frowning severely, "how delicate and wonderful a thing this Nothingness is."

"Now let us talk business," he added briskly. "You are going to help me make the money. We will divide the profits. Is that understood?"

"You got to have me," said Tubby.

"Well?" asked the professor.

"It ain't right to only give me half," persisted Tubby. "Maybe I won't help you," he added cunningly.

"But you must," the professor said with an injured air.

Tubby's brain was busy. "What's that over there?" he asked abruptly.

"Where?" asked the professor. As he turned to look, Tubby suddenly seized the vial, and began spraying it violently up and down over his companion.

The little man gasped with astonishment. A look of mingled fear and rage overspread his face. But before he could move to defend himself, he began to fade. Tubby frantically continued spraying, and in a moment the professor had disappeared.

Then Tubby set down the vial and lay back in his chair. He was trembling violently; his brain was in a turmoil. On the table before him lay the precious bottle—all his now, to make him rich and famous.

For a long time Tubby sat and gloated over his good fortune. "Rich and famous, rich and famous," he kept thinking. Then, slowly through his confused brain came the fear of what he had done. The professor was dead; *he* had killed him. He thought about this for a while. A murderer! Visions of prison, then the electric-chair floated before him.

A murderer! *He* knew it. But nobody else knew it. If only he could forget. That would make it all right. Forget!

Tubby picked up the vial and stared at it vaguely. "It can wipe out thoughts, too." The professor had said that.

Tubby continued staring at the vial as it lay in his hand. Then slowly

he raised it to his head. Pressing the nozzle against his temple he squeezed the bulb vigorously.

Then he started to his feet. The vial slipped from his hand; there was a sound of breaking glass. He gripped the back of his chair. His other hand went to his eyes. His brain was reeling. He sat down suddenly.

Tubby blinked solemnly across the smoke-laden room. Under the light in the center his three friends sat playing cards.

"The smallest microbe—" he began aggressively.



# Highway

by Robert W. Lowndes

*You may perhaps be accustomed to taking a certain route in your daily course between your home and your office, or school, or favorite store. You may have to walk several blocks or drive a certain distance. In the course of your daily routine you—if you are like almost everyone else—probably navigate this route without giving it any particular thought. Your feet are directed by habit, you know where you are and where you are going, you know what your next turn will be, you don't think about it any more. And then one day, by some twist of mind, you suddenly seem to open your eyes and spot a street that seems new to you or a side-road that you had never noticed before. It startles you for a moment until you rationalize it back into obscurity by the thought that it has always been there, that you must have always seen it, just never bothered to notice. Probably your rationalization is accurate—maybe . . . Now here's a story about the old road to Stamphis. You remember it—or don't you?*

“IT WAS just about a year and a half ago,” said Harvey, “that the three fools from nowhere came to see me about the Stamphis highway.”

“From nowhere?” I objected.

The ex-Selectman filled his pipe. “How many ways do you suppose there are of getting into town, Bob?”

“Well, first of all, the orthodox methods: train, bus, private car.”

He shook his head as he took my proffered matches. “There’s always someone on hand at both the railway station and bus terminal. The fools were impressive to look at; if they’d been seen, you can be sure that whoever saw them would have talked about it.

“As for private cars, Peabody and Jem White are at either end of town with the Japanese Beetle brigade. Every car is stopped. And neither of them would have kept quiet about a load of such-looking gentlemen, were they to pass through.”

I recovered my matches. “Couldn’t they have come at night?”

“Then the town patrol would have spotted them. The boys don’t get offensive about it, but they check up on every car on the highway after dark. We aren’t taking any chances on fifth columnists, no sir.”

This, I decided, could go on indefinitely. And I was more interested in the main story. “Looks like you’re right, then,” I conceded. “But tell me about the Stamphis highway.”

"They were philanthropists, or so they said. Soon's I heard that word, I thought to myself that they were probably confidence men. Never heard of a philanthropist yet who didn't have something up his sleeve.

"Well, they came to see me, showed credentials and what not. It all looked in perfect order, you understand."

"What were they like?" I interrupted.

"Distinguished looking. Very distinguished. You felt that you must have heard of them before, such prominent people couldn't have slipped by your notice all these years. And yet you couldn't exactly place your finger on them."

"Did they look like foreigners?"

"No-o-o. Clean cut, spruce-looking Americans—main one was around 40, I should say. Very polite, friendly—it's hard to believe that they were such fools."

I threw my butt away and stared gloomily out into the main street. It's no use to try to hurry Harvey, or get him to tell a story in any but his own way. And, if you ever want to get the whole story, don't start an argument until it's all out. He'll explain any strange-sounding details later.

"Maybe you'll remember that the highway department was in something of a mess around that time? Jenkins had just been sent up for embezzlement, and we were in the red badly.

"Well, just at the right time, the fools showed up with their proposition. They wanted, they said, to replace the existing road with a four-lane highway to Stamphis, and run a side-road in as well. They would pay for it themselves, and put a toll bridge across the swamp.

"We'd been considering bridging the swamp for a long time, seeing as how it cost us so much to replace roads running through there, but saw no way of going through with it. And you know what would have happened to any Selectman who suggested getting financial aid from the government."

I nodded. I knew very well what would have happened inasmuch as my brother had committed political suicide by trying.

"I won't go into all the technical details, except to say that the deal was made, and they started to work on the highway.

"There was just one bit of trouble from the very first. They kept on talking about the *Stamphis* highway. Ever hear of the place?"

I'd been hoping Harvey would ask me that soon. "No," I replied happily.

"Neither had any of us. We were as polite as we could be to the fools, but it was difficult because none of us had ever heard of Stamphis. We didn't want to look like fools ourselves, but that's the way it was.

"My assistant, Jeffrey, got around that. He brought in his cousin, who was visiting him at the time—I guess they talked it over beforehand—and, seemingly just as a bit of hospitality introduced him to the fools. So we got the chance to ask them where in tarnation Stamphis might be without losing face."

"Where was it?" I asked in what I hoped was a moderate tone of voice.

"Oh, they showed us. One of them took out a map smiling and wagging his finger at us, making snide remarks about our typical brand of humor—

nothing offensive, mind you. He took out a map and showed us our town, then drew a pencil line across to Stamphis.

"Jeffrey's cousin spoke up then. 'But Waterloo's right there,' he said. The rest of us just held our breaths. We were afraid that an unpleasant situation might develop.

"But it didn't. The fools were wonderful diplomats. Before anything unpleasant could happen, they urged that we drive with them to Stamphis and complete the deal as their guests."

He puffed away on his pipe meditatively. "You know, the only way I can explain it is that a lot of people, myself included, must have gotten somewhat touched for a spell. Because we'd *all* forgotten that there was such a place as Stamphis. But, after all, seeing *is* believing.

"There was something odd about the fools, too, while I think of it. I thought it was just my eyes, but Jeffrey noticed it, too, and he doesn't need glasses yet. Their shadows sort of flickered."

The telephone rang just then and Harvey excused himself. He came back a couple of minutes later. "That was Buckley," he remarked. "By the way, Arlene wants you to bring home some ant powder. How much longer will you two be staying, this summer?"

"Until the end of the month. Then it's back to New York, and I'll have to admit I'm not sorry."

"Don't like the country, eh?"

"Not for any long periods, Harvey. But what about Stamphis?"

"It was there all right. Not a bad-looking little town at all. Neatly laid out, nice-looking buildings, tasteful homes."

"New?"

"Some of it. But it was established a long time ago. After the Civil War."

"But that's impossible!" I exclaimed. "I drove through this state only a couple of years ago, and I passed through Waterloo on the way. I wouldn't be forgetting that; got taken for a ride in a big way at a garage, when I stopped to have my car fixed."

Harvey shook his head. "I think you must have been mistaken, Bob. But let me get on. As I was saying, the fools finished the deal and the highway was built. You see that for yourself; they did a fine job, hired a good deal of men from the town, although the foremen were all from Stamphis.

"But they never made any money on it, and they must have lost thousands on that side road. The one through the swamp."

"Huh?"

"Remember passing a side road on your way here, one with 'Road Closed' signs up?"

I pondered for a moment. "Yes," I replied at last, "I think I do."

"Well, that's it. They tried to run it through the swamp. No one but a fool would think of it. They built it for about fifteen miles then gave it up. That's why the road is closed; it doesn't lead anywhere—just comes to a dead stop all of a sudden and there you are, about ten miles from Stamphis, and nothing but a swamp ahead of you."

"Jeepers, who would do a thing like that?" I protested.

"You see?" said Harvey. "It's just as I said. They were fools."

Arlene insisted upon our driving to Stamphis that very night, after I told her of my chat with Harvey, and I must admit that some such action had been in my mind anyway.

"It's been a long time since I was there," she sighed as I slid behind the wheel. "And I've neglected Grandfather Wheeler terribly."

"You never told me you had relatives there."

It's rather strange, now that I think of it, but Arlene and I know next to nothing about each other's past. About a year ago, I was sitting in a theatre, trying not to look at a particularly vapid secondary feature while waiting for the main show. My eyes fell upon an attractive woman a row ahead, and I recall thinking that if her personality and character equaled her looks, she'd make a swell wife.

I must have said it aloud—I do have a habit of talking to myself in low tones, because she turned around and whispered back: "That might be very nice for you, but what would I be getting?"

There was an empty seat next to her; I moved into it to apologize and somehow we got to talking, in low tones, so that I didn't see much of the main feature thereafter. I wouldn't exactly call it love at first sight; we found each other so interesting that it didn't come to me until some time after we were married that I loved the gal. Don't ask me to explain that one, either.

But, the point is, I never did ask her much of anything about her past, nor she about mine.

Arlene laughed, breaking into my reverie. "Gramp Wheeler isn't *my* grandfather, Bob. That's just what everyone calls him."

I turned my attention back to the road, because there was a big curve ahead. In a moment, I saw why. A side road led straight ahead; there were big "Road Closed" signs there. Of course, this was the road that led fifteen miles into the swamp, then came to a stop.

"Why do you think they built that?" I asked Arlene.

"Maybe their money ran out, or something happened to make them stop."

"But why would they attempt it in the first place. The project itself is insane."

I remembered other things Harvey had told me. They'd gone ahead with remaking the old road, all right. No kick there. But their very attitude was such as to give the unmistakable impression that it was the swamp road wherein their interests really lay, that the main road was just an auxiliary project.

Why? Why, if their main idea was to build a highway through the swamp, did they bother with a not-too-necessary project like re-making the old road? In fact, and this just struck me with a dull thud, if the swamp road had been completed, then this highway we were now riding would have been superfluous.

No matter how I looked at it, it all became more mystifying. They'd built the toll bridge where the old road cut across the narrower neck of the swamp. But the only conclusion to which I could come was that they *never*

*intended to finish the swamp road at all.* It had been planned that way, to be unfinished and never used.

Beside me, Arlene hummed gaily. "Slow down, pet; they enforce speed laws here."

I shot a glance at her. "Darling, are you a native of Stamphis?"

She stretched lazily. "It's nice," she murmured, "but I never lived there."

"But—look, have you ever noticed anything queer about it—or the people?"

"No, Bob," was the definite reply. "Turn right here and slow down; it's easy to miss the house."

Grandfather Wheeler was all Arlene had claimed and then some. Picture Charles Coburn with a George Bernard Shaw beard and a Lionel Barrymore voice, and you had Gramp. He had two main topics of discussion: strange and fearsome creatures of field and forest, and Stamphis, its past, present and future. I am ready to swear that all his Bunyanesque stories were originated on the spur of the moment, but that didn't make them any the less superb. We spent the evening listening to his tales, and looking over his album of clippings from the *Stamphis Guardian*, a seven-volume file which went back to 1868. I couldn't see any difference between these clippings and the kind you would find in other small-town newspapers. The outstanding thing was that the *Guardian* had been run by the same family, passing from son to grandson since its inception.

We walked around town a bit—Gramp wanted to show me everything, since I hadn't been there before. It was all strangely familiar. Not a single thing about Stamphis was what I would call peculiar to the town alone; the buildings, houses, layouts, newspaper, political setup—all were just like other towns I'd seen. Even the people were like replicas of others in other parts of the country. I'd met Gramp Wheeler before—I was sure of that. I met him in a little town in Maine, only he didn't look quite so much like a composite of Coburn, Shaw and Barrymore.

And I hadn't forgotten that this town was precisely where Waterloo, Indiana, should have been.

In fact, I began to wonder why Gramp Wheeler was so anxious to pile up first hand evidence to the fact that Stamphis was there. Slicing away the friendly, inoffensive approach, that was what the evening's activity amounted to. We were bombarded with the propaganda, all of which could be reduced to one sentence: Stamphis had been in existence, on this site, since 1865.

I asked a few guarded questions and found that no one around the town had ever heard of Waterloo. Arlene couldn't understand what I meant; Waterloo, she maintained, was a place in Europe, but there wasn't any such location in this state. Not wanting to get into an argument, I dropped the subject for the nonce, and let Gramp Wheeler shoot the bull to me.

The next day I started in on my very quiet campaign. First of all, the matter of road maps. I drove across the state, collecting maps at every gas station I passed, then cut into Illinois before coming back by a different route. By the time I returned, there was a nice collection of maps in the back of the car.

One by one I opened them and one by one the evidence hit me between the eyes. *Not one* of these road maps showed Waterloo; not one listed it. They all indicated and listed Stamphis.

Next thing, I checked up through the post office—wrote to Washington—and got a reply from some official with very complete data from ancient files. Yes, Stamphis obtained its post office in 1869, just as Gramp Wheeler had claimed. And there was no post office at Waterloo—in fact, the person who answered my inquiry vehemently denied that such a place existed.

A carefully worded letter to the State Senator, whom I had met, elicited a reply to the effect that he had spent many happy days in Stamphis, and was I joking about this Waterloo?

By this time, I must admit that I had begun to question my own sanity. After all, you can't argue with government files running back over fifty years, I reasoned. It must be some sort of delusion on my part. Yet—Harvey and others had suffered from the same malady, if delusion it were.

But a day or so after receiving the Senator's reply, I found some old 1948 and 1949 road maps in a trunk. They all listed Waterloo; not one mentioned Stamphis. And a Decatur newspaper, dated 1946, carried Waterloo credit lines on a couple of minor stories.

I started another campaign, checking up with almanacs and gazetteers. The results convinced me that I was not insane, but that something unpleasant was afoot. First of all, almanacs and gazetteers I had bought at the time of their appearance, up to 1950, listed Waterloo. 1950 found Stamphis nosing it out. But almanacs obtained through shops, or ordered directly from publishers, whatever date was on them, were all out for Stamphis.

It's rather strange that it took me so long to think of looking into the closed swamp highway. In fact, I doubt if I would have thought of it at all had not Harvey mentioned, around this time, that cars were obviously going in, despite signs. Ordinarily, I would have dismissed it all as unimportant—a deserted road is very convenient if you have a car and a girl—but it struck me that more serious matters than surreptitious necking was afoot. On a sudden hunch I told Arlene that I had to go to Stamphis on business and set out for the fools' highway.

Even in the hushed glow of my dimmed lights it was clear that the fools' highway was a road in constant use. Yet, no one in town seemed ever to have seen any cars either going in or coming out. I'd talked about it to the patrolmen, and they'd said they passed by the entrance any number of times each night, but the signs were always there, the obstructions undisturbed.

Now I had to disturb them myself and get in, put them back, and get away before the lads came by. Fortunately, my investigation had given me rather exact data on matters such as precisely what times the patrol passed fools' highway. I had, I estimated, a good twenty minutes before they'd be due by. Unless something went wrong, I should be able to drag enough obstruction away to get my buggy in, shove it back, and be out of sight before they happened along.

That's the way it was, too. Only the obstructions were not the formidable, heavy-timbered affairs they seemed; they were light enough so that I could

easily carry them to one side without any real exertion—and I don't get enough exercise. I slid the car in, then moved them back.

So this was the fools' highway, the road to nowhere built by the men from nowhere, the road which came to a dead end fifteen miles out. This was the highway designed to give the appearance that it had been unfinished, and was not in use. A clever dodge. But the false obstruction work made me decide that the swamp road was not the innocent piece of rich man's folly it seemed. And I hadn't driven far before first hand evidence began to show itself.

First of all, the texture was decidedly different. Not that I'm anything of an authority on road construction, but I know when a road seems resilient beneath the wheels, and this one did all of that. My chariot seemed to leap ahead with little or no effort; finally I shut off the motor and coasted.

For about ten minutes I coasted at a good rate—though not letting myself hit over thirty in this territory—as if there were a steady downward slope, belying what was clearly before my eyes. The scenery was not unusual—until I passed between what looked like a set of caution signals, facing each other across the road.

The change was as abrupt as a roughcut closeup in the movies. It just leaped up at me. The whole scene became a dismal grey, through which a few distant shapes were discernible, but nothing else. The edges of the highway on either side ran into the grey and were swallowed up by it. It wasn't fog; you got the feeling that it was probably solid enough, and that it would stay put, but there it was none the less, and a gloomier looking scene I never saw.

Gloomy? Did I say that? The word is anticlimactic. That grey land was dismal and desolate beyond description. It was as if desolation itself had despaired and cut its bloodless throat, to fall and disintegrate into the grey. It would not color it by calling it a hungry grey, or a gaping void, or the like. No, I would say only that it was too frightful for horror.

And with the numbing effect of it, there came weariness.

My first desire, after a spasm of yawning, was merely to stop, get out and stretch a bit. It was almost impossible to judge as to whether or not I was really making any speed here. The grey on either side of me was unchanging, and for all I knew, the car might have been standing still for all the purr of the motor and the shiver of the speedometer needle. But something deep inside me warned against getting out of the car here. Then the ripples of weariness began to splash over me, until I found myself falling asleep innumerable times, and waking just in time to keep from going off the road.

Something told me that any delay here was deadly, despite the almost overwhelming desire now merely to stop and curl up on the front seat for a nap. I tried to concentrate on something to keep awake.

What was it Harvey had said about the three strangers? I'd meant to ask him more about it. Oh, yes—they flickered. He'd amplified it a bit last time I'd seen him, but I still hadn't had the chance to look into the matter very deeply.

According to Harvey, you could only see the flicker in a particularly

bright light—it took full sunlight to bring out the effect. The shadows of these three seemed to have shadows within their general outlines that weaved and moved about like tongues of flame.

And I wondered if most of the population—perhaps all of it—of Stamphis were not like the three clever fools in this regard.

My meditations were cut short as the car seemed to leap ahead, almost rearing up off the road, front wheels spinning in the air. I must have fallen asleep and pressed the accelerator down to the floor. But that was what saved me. Before the weariness could carry me away again, I saw another set of seeming caution signals ahead; there came a jolt similar to that I had experienced upon the first transition and the weariness and the grey were both gone.

Bolt awake I stared about me, mouth agape. This was no swamp, nor was it the strange facsimile that was Stamphis, nor again, I am sure, was it any part of the world I knew.

I think I murmured something impressively dramatic to myself, like: "The road to nowhere—leads *outside!*"

I don't think it is possible to give a clear picture of what that "outside" at the end of fools' highway was like, because I'm sure that no human being could see enough of it. Every second I was there, the hairs on my neck bristled and I felt something like a growl in my throat; everywhere I looked I knew there was more here than met my senses, and I was afraid of what was beyond my comprehension. Just because I couldn't see, hear, touch, taste, or smell it didn't mean that it couldn't hurt me.

The outstanding aspect was a *shifting*. Nothing seemed to be the same for any length of time. It was like the well-known optical illusions of the cubes. You look at them and, at first, it may appear that you are looking down at them, but for no reason at all, the perspective alters suddenly, and it seems you are looking at their under sides. That's a rough idea of how it was here.

There was color here—the general aspect of it was a sort of orange. But the sky was dotted with blank spots. Not black—just blank, sort of underwater effect when there's nothing to see but water. I could sense motions at times, but they were vague, and I could never quite get distances. Things which seemed at first to be far away suddenly appeared close at hand, and that which was within grasp would apparently be flickered far into the distance without any movement on its part. I could never be sure whether moving objects were coming or going.

There was a sort of buildings and shapes in and around them. The buildings, outside of the warped distance effects, were about the only reasonably stable things I saw; they were a jet black set against the orange of the sky—the light itself seemed to be a tapering yellow—and I can only describe them as fearsome. They were not built for anything like human shapes or tastes and it was a constant struggle not to imagine that they were themselves monsters.

And the beings of outside? They were of various colors and sizes. Fantastic colored beings, often incomplete to my eyes where the colors were



outside of my vision. I do not think what I saw were their true shapes; I'm positive I never saw a complete one. But, judging by the shapes of the openings in the buildings, I would say that they were generally cylindrical, for the most part much taller than a human.

If at any time they were aware of my presence, they gave no sign of it. And the implications of that, I think, were far more devastating to my peace of mind than had I been the object of pursuit, capture, or even attempted destruction. Their total indifference to and apparent contempt of the human spy in their midst is a thing I must not permit myself to dwell upon. That way lies madness.

I entered buildings and saw machinery, or what appeared to be machinery, which was partly impressive, partly indistinct, and wholly fantastic. There were some simple things, such as vehicles—which always avoided me—and what I imagine were common objects. Perhaps a scientifically minded person could find a great deal more that is understandable in "outside" than I did; my whole being was saturated with dread and I did not stay in any one place long.

There were some things I saw which were far too familiar. One was a model of a man, a woman, and a child; really amazing imitations in what I suppose were plastics and wires. They existed as complete unities, as bare frameworks and cross-sections. The other was what appeared to be a library on our world. It was complete to an appalling degree—and, filling one entire side of a building was what looked like a master chart, with diagrams, a few figures I could read, and samples of alphabets now in existence.

And, finally, there was a complete model, built to scale of Staphis.

I have read stories about menaces from other worlds and planes of existence, and read how humans managed to go to the alien world and there successfully sabotage, combat, and finally wipe out the danger. These had always afforded me amusement, but never had I realized how completely ridiculous they were—how completely helpless one man, or even a group of men would be in the alien world.

Yes, I suppose I could have smashed the models, set fire to the books—if indeed they were constructed of inflammable material, but what would have been accomplished? How could I hope successfully to fight against beings I could see but in part, and what chance had I of getting back to warn my fellow humans?

There is a great deal which I am pretty sure I've forgotten. The unconscious censor which either colors or obliterates the unbearable has done its work upon me—otherwise I would be a raving lunatic, and how could I hope to warn the world?

I do not know how long I stayed in that world. Perhaps had there not been the threat overhanging the whole business, I might have found some measure of beauty and wonder in its strangeness. Perhaps truly the outsiders mean no harm to us, and are merely studying us, taking care to behave in such a manner as to rouse the least possible suspicion.

I would like to believe this. The fact that I was not harmed while outside would lend support to such a conclusion.

Last week, I had occasion to drive from New York to Boston and back. I've made the trip a number of times before, and I have never come across a town called Dorcax. I am sure there was no such town before this year, because, as with Stamphis, I have checked upon almanacs, road maps, and gazetteers I purchased some years back, at the time of publication.

But inquiry reveals that Dorcax was founded in 1883, has a post office since that year, and since 1890 has had a weekly publication called the *Dorcax Independent*. It is a typical town and looks just like any other small town. A few people in neighboring towns—old people—seem a bit confused about it, but have decided that their memories are beginning to slip.

Both Stamphis and Dorcax are mentioned now and then in metropolitan newspapers and I find a surprisingly large number of professional men throughout the country, political figures, government employees—a number of them in Washington—and businessmen either come from these towns, have made their residence there, or have married into families native to these towns.

And yesterday the sun was very bright. I just noticed something for the first time.

Arlene's shadow seems to flicker.

# When the Flame-Flowers Blossomed

by Leslie F. Stone

*It is hard to imagine a civilization whose basic constituents are vegetables. Though we ourselves live in a world which has more vegetable life on it than animal life, and though that life surrounds us in a myriad shapes and sizes, we cannot put ourselves psychologically en rapport with any plant. The "mind" of a plant, if such could exist, is something that cannot be conceived, so utterly different is their mode of life and their anatomical construction. Therefore it was with great daring that Leslie F. Stone ventured to depict a world whose dominating intelligent species is a vegetable one. It seems to us that she did rather well.*

ONE moment the forest was serenely quiet, somnolent; the next it was in an uproar. For it was not every day that a space-ship dropped out of the swirling mists that topped the waving fern-crown of the tallest and most ancient of the great Ancadus tree-ferns, furrowing the rich dark loam of the clearing floor.

Not that the Ancadus guessed the long black cylinder to be a space-ship. Their conception of the universe was limited to that space beneath the gray cloud-masses that enfolded their world. Nor could they conceive of a vehicle of transportation. For their life began in an over-large hard-cased seed-spore that grew into a free-moving young tree-fern that made the best of its god-given activity until the urge to root itself came; then one stood ever upright, living and dreaming, conversing with one's neighbors, ever ready to flip forth a tentacle to ensnare one of the silly, unthinkable animals that foolishly accepted the lure of the fleshy, false fruits that the Ancadus dangled as bait for just that purpose.

Nevertheless, they were stirred, curious. From amid the stationary boles of their elders came the young ferns, balancing themselves upon their five walking-roots, eager to see what they could see, just as young Earthlings would have pushed themselves forward between the bodies of their elders had such a strange phenomenon taken place on their Main Street.

Unmolested by the cutting ax of Man, with no other enemy than the encroaching life-choking parasitic vines that the Ancadus, by means of their long flexible tentacles, kept to the background, the great tree-ferns were truly the monarchs of all they surveyed. Since Mother Nature had failed to provide cross-pollination in the form of insects, and since their giant

seed-spores were too heavy for the soft, gentle winds of Venus to bear aloft, they had developed perambulatory movement in the young so that all the planet might know them, and that the young should not choke the old.

Early in their life history they had discovered a predilection for animal blood, and to satisfy this unnatural lust they had brought forth large flesh-flowers that the gurgura, the ruswan, the petrus and the bav could not resist. Wisely the great Ancadus tree-ferns did not kill outright, but took their toll of blood from each passing creature, leaving it to crawl away as best it could, knowing that as soon as it had replenished its life-fluid the silly little beast would come again and again to the bait.

Innocent-looking enough were these vampire trees with their pale, white trunks topped with snowy crowns of crackling fronds wherein nestled the furred tentacles, curled, like rosettes, just above the dead black band which was the eye-circle. But those selfsame tentacles, sometimes a hundred feet long, endowed with the twin senses of hearing and smelling, were as deadly as the cobra, and the eye-circle gave vision in every direction.

Now the Ancadus were filled with questions.

"What is it?"

"Is it animal or vegetable?"

"Whence did it come?"

"How did it get here?"

"Has anyone ever seen such life before?"

These were but a few of the questions coming from all sides, for during the long millenniums of their evolution the great Ancadus tree-ferns had evolved speech and thought. Not speech such as Man uses, nor voice tones like those of the lesser animals. No mechanism could have recorded the speech of the tree-ferns, since it possessed no sound as animal life knows sound. But it was there, within the consciousness of the trees themselves.

Suddenly there was an end to the questions. Old Gorn, the patriarch, standing on the edge of the clearing, was voicing his thoughts. And when he spoke, all else were silent.

"Children," said he, "a strange visitant has come among us. Never in all my long centuries have I seen the like. None of us knows what this thing may portend for us. But only it can answer our questions. Therefore, let us commune with it, wait for it to break the silence. Only the foolish ask questions of the infinite."

As if his words were the thing the black cylinder awaited, the cylinder spawned, there before their eyes, two six-feet high, free-moving creatures.

Never had the great Ancadus tree-ferns known such life. Tunnux and Nushu, two newly rooted tree-ferns, were too excited to heed the patriarch's warning. Softly they conversed between themselves.

"What can they be? Certainly they are quite unlike any trees I ever saw in all my roving days," whispered Tunnux.

"Adolescents, unquestionably," murmured Nushu, "since they have freedom of movement and walk upright. No animal moves so. Only trees are thus gifted!"

"But how sparse grow their fern-crowns! Poor things, there is small beauty in their family if they are truly representative of their species."

"Trees indeed! Look! Look again, my friends," an older tree was speaking. "Did ever you see trees with bark that grows as theirs grows, *away* from the bole? And look you to the shortness of the upper tentacles. Ugh, they're clawed, clawed like the animals. And see—no eye-circle either, merely two ugly seeing-balls set in pinkish bark. Then they possess but one sucker and those queer smelling-appendages such as animals use to smell out our flowers! Trees indeed! Soon they'll come seeking our fruits to feast upon. Look you and see how like they are to that cacmu that I bled two days since, and from which I am still feeling indisposed."

On all sides other discussions were carried on. Two camps were formed; those that likened the spawn of the cylinder to themselves, and those that likened them to the animals. That they walked upright as no animal walked upright, and wore a fern-crown, sparse though it was, made them comparable to the tree-ferns. But on the other hand, who had ever heard of trees with seeing-balls, single suckers, clawed tentacles and the like?

Too, if they were trees they had small intelligence (no one expected an animal to have intelligence), for they failed to grasp Gorn's simplest communication. And now they were acting as no other tree, or animal either, for that matter, had ever acted.

Very rarely there occur on the planet great wind storms, storms strong enough to sway the great Ancadus tree-ferns from side to side. Once, a decade back, there had been a storm that had actually bent the boles of the younger, slenderer trees half-way to the ground. Thus, the Ancadus had thought they knew something of bending. Yet here were the spawn of the black cylinder doing more than that. They were bending themselves in two!

And no wonder! Some of the young trees had to snicker. To pluck something from the ground the poor creatures had to bend themselves double for the simple reason that their grasping tentacles could not reach the ground. To think of it!

So engrossed were the trees over this ridiculous predicament of the visitors they had not bothered to notice what the creatures were picking up from the ground, were gathering together into a heap not far from the open mouth of the cylinder. When they did notice, it was something else to laugh over. The silly things, going to the trouble of collecting those things . . . twigs, sticks, desiccated remains of old fronds dropped by the Ancadus. Could one actually believe it? They must be related to the petrus that collects such trash upon which to lie down after tiring themselves by running here and there on their inadequate walking-roots.

But wait, what was this?

Before the very eye-circles of the trees they did it, bringing the old dead things to life once more. And such life!

Several young trees that had pushed close to the edge of the clearing all but lost their balance and toppled over in their surprise, and a great sigh went up from the whole watching forest. Who would have believed that

such beautiful flowers dwelt in that old dead cellulose? Not even Gorn was able to name those dancing convolutions. For to the great Ancadus, fire was as unknown as were the men that had brought it into being.

What could the Ancadus know of fire in their mist-clothed world where even lightning was so rare a thing that Gorn, older than the oldest civilization of Man, had had no experience with it?

Ohing and ahing, the forest stared at the new beauty, enthralled. It was for Elsel, one of the youngest free-moving fern-trees, to consider investigating it.

Carefully—oh so carefully!—so as to draw no attention to himself, he lowered his longest tentacle, unfurling it inch by inch, his eye-circlet upon those gorgeous flowers that bloomed and died as rapidly as do the flowers of the xmaur bush. And so fully were his senses trained upon those dancing efflorescences that he was not aware of the latest findings of his people concerning the intruders.

From downwind, across the clearing, Naxum, an old tree, was reporting. He had the scent. And to the adult trees the brilliance of the saltant flames was paled, all else was as nothing to this new intelligence. Blood and flesh. Blood! Blood!

By the forest right Gorn, the patriarch, should be first to taste the blood. As oldest of the clan it was his due when strange, new delicacies wandered thither. But the ancient tree-fern was wise. He had seen what had overtaken tree-ferns that had dined unwisely, for not all animal blood is beneficial to tree-life.

Not far from where he stood there leaned the remains of a tree-fern that had sipped the blood of a pocus, a creature tradition taught was poisonous. It had been at a time of famine, and Daxur, the rash tree, had not listened to Gorn's sage wisdom when that soft-fleshed beast came into the forest. In consequence, Daxur no longer answered when spoken to. Bark had scaled from his sides, leaving ugly raw wounds, and he could no longer stand upright, but leaned against his nearer neighbors that would gladly have allowed him to fall had they been capable of moving their own rooted boles.

Therefore, Gorn suggested caution. He asked that lots be drawn, that but one of their number taste the blood of the strangers. That one's reward, in turn, would be that of a hero—or a martyr, as the case might be.

"Wherefrom come this pair, therefrom will come others. Bide your time, and when the black cylinder spawns again all shall dine; else leave the creatures strictly alone, according to the findings!"

But for the first time in his patriarchy his people had not wanted to listen to Gorn. One only to be chosen to the repast? Was Gorn in his dotage? Nay, here was blood, and according to Naxum its odor was savory. The pocus, they all knew, was poisonous. Was that reason enough to condemn the new animals likewise? Nay, if Gorn refused his right, then the rest would adhere to the Law. The Law!

And the next instant the forest bloomed like a fairy glade as every Ancadus within a quarter of a mile of the clearing, excepting Gorn, blossomed with brilliantly tinted false fruits that they brought at will from an excrescence at the tip of the long grasping tentacles. Henceforth, everything depended upon the prey itself; they would choose that fruit most attractive, and to whomsoever selected went the spoils. That was the law of the forest.

Never in the history of the Ancadus had any red-blooded creature refused the lure, and certainly they had no expectation that the newcomers would ignore it. Such a thing was unheard of. Yet the men gave but a long, wondering glance at the floral display, turning back to the strange, shiny object they had in the meantime dragged from the cylinder, a queer affair of queerer angles.

How were the Ancadus to know this for a radio with which the men intended to contact their home planet, to advise it of their safe arrival? Space, time, radio—these were as nothing to the Ancadus. They knew only consternation at this untoward event. Such a happening was without precedent in their annals. It went against all tradition. An animal to disregard their lush, richly odorous fruit? Unthinkable! Unwilling to believe that the creatures would not rise to the bait sooner or later, they waited, tense.

However, not all the Ancadus were thus aroused. Little Elsel, the young free-moving tree-fern, was not at all concerned in the blood of the cylinder's spawn. Not until he had rooted himself would he bother himself about fleshy animals. It was the flowering flames of the campfire that intrigued him. By inching his tentacle forward over the ground he had reached a point midway between the fire and himself without having been detected by either the fire-breeders or the tree-ferns.

The radio, which the pair were setting up, likewise meant nothing to him; its squareness was something outside his comprehension. Only in the infinitesimal does Nature produce cube shapes, and the object before him was as *outré* to him as a three-dimensional object would be to a two-dimensional creature. All the senses of the young tree-fern were concentrated upon the campfire with its ebullient blossoms rising and dying in one breath. So it happened that he did not notice that one of the pair had turned its seeing-balls in his direction.

Rising from the spot upon which he had folded himself, the creature shuffled across the clearing to where Elsel's tentacle tip lay.

Frightened, the perambulatory tree-fern froze into immobility; his tentacle lay like a dead end of a creeper vine. It gave him shivers to see the beast bend down to inspect it with near-sighted eyeballs, and he sighed a great sigh of relief when the creature went back to the fire.

Waiting until he was settled once more, Elsel again took up his march to the flames. It was purely accidental that he brushed the stumpy walking-root of the second creature bending over that squarish object by the fire. Nor was he prepared for the wild yell the thing emitted, causing the pair

of them to dash away in wild confusion. That, however, was to be expected; for did not all animals respect and fear the great Ancadus?

Only Elsel had not expected them to return so quickly, to pick up his offending tentacle. It made him cringe, that touch of warm, resilient animal flesh. Not until he had taken root could he know excitement at such close proximity. But when the same creature thrust an exploring claw inside one of his rubbery sucking-cups that covered the underside of his tentacle, his reaction in closing over the claw was entirely involuntary. If the creature had not screamed in fear and shaken him loose, Elsel would have released him anyway. Still, he was wholly unprepared for the next moment, when the tentacular feeler fell into the fire.

To think that those lovely, dancing flowers could be so bitter, so cruel! The agony of Elsel's cry resounded throughout all the forest. The pain was of a proportion the like of which he had never dreamed. No wonder he writhed, beating the air, the ground, in his wild anguish. Again he screamed. Gradually, as the shock died away, he regained sufficient composure to withdraw his wounded appendage. Nursing his pain he turned away, halting now and then to unfurl the bedeviled member and plunge it deep into the cool, rich loam of the forest floor wherein there seemed to be a slight balm.

One would think that the Ancadus would have taken warning from that direful experience of the young tree-fern. They had all seen, and they had heard. Yet the smell of the blood that Elsel had drawn was too intoxicating.

Simultaneously a dozen or more long tentacles shot across the clearing to the cylinder into which the men had darted to escape the flaying whip. They avoided the fire, but beyond that the tree-ferns were insensible to any danger that might arise from their action.

Having learned something of the flexibility of those long, questing arms, the men did not quit the protective shadow of their space-ship immediately, and at sight of those feelers lashing out toward them they ran again within the confines of the cylinder. Before they could barricade themselves, half the tentacles had followed them in, feeling with sensitive tip-ends for the pair, forbidding the shutting of the ship's mouth by their bulk.

Instantly, three tentacles fastened themselves upon the fighting form of one of the men. Somehow the other managed to hide himself, and no matter how the remaining feelers searched they could not find him. Though they possessed scent, they were blind, depending upon the eye-circles set just below the fern-crown of the tree, and the animal smell of the two was thick inside the cylinder.

Even after the captive had been withdrawn inch by inch, battling every step of the way, those others failed to locate his companion, concealed in some crevice. They withdrew at last, only to remain outside, waiting. . . .

Geeb, Masur and Jadan argued among themselves over their victim, each claiming himself in rightful possession as they dragged the man across



the clearing, lifted him screaming and struggling into the air. Then Masur fastened his suckers upon the pink bark of the creature's arm and imbibed deeply of the rich life-fluid. That was too much for the others. Forgetting their quarrel, they realized that part of the feast is better than none at all. Here was one creature who would not be allowed to crawl away half dead, to return again on the morrow. They would suck him dry and toss the husk away.

But it had not entered the thoughts of the Ancadus that the second man would actually come to the rescue of his brother creature. The Ancadus were individualists, banding together only when concerned with the common weal of their species. They could not conceive of unselfishness in another. Therefore, those that guarded the cylinder mouth had permitted their appendages to grow lax, and they were wholly unprepared to act instantly as the second man came hurtling into the open in answer to the pleas of his fellow.

Elsel had taught him how the Ancadus reacted to even a minor burn, and he had good reason to be glad that the campfire was ready at hand. Grasping a lighted brand, he flung it among the serpentine coils that held his friend aloft. And again the forest listened to the agony shriek of their kind in answer to the bite of the flame-blossoms. Unconsciously Masur and Jadan flinched, and in so doing loosed their hold upon their victim. Then as a second and third flaming brand came flying through the air they dropped the captive.

Weakened by loss of blood, and dazed by the twelve-foot fall, the man was slow in reorganizing his faculties, and before he succeeded in regaining his upright position, two more tentacles reached out and grasped him. In their gluttony the rest of the tree-ferns disregarded the menace of the flame-flowers.

Only no more brands came flying through the air as those tentacles in the clearing sought out the avenger. To each he was forced to give his baptism of fire before they were willing to leave him to his own devices.

But they served to reduce his ammunition, and to replenish it the man had to leave the fire, dash here and there to gather such sticks as lay close at hand. Twice a tentacle all but tripped him, but he danced safely away each time, and with the new supply of torches renewed the succor of his friend.

Reluctantly the constricting coils released the captive, who managed to climb to his walking-roots and stagger several steps before another blood-crazed tree-fern plucked him up.

Shaking a balled-up claw at the trees, the fire-breeder went farther afield to collect more fuel, taking a lighted torch for his own protection.

Now, all this while old Gorn had thoughtfully been considering the scene. It had come to him that without a replenishment of his campfire the fire-breeder was powerless. Thereupon he transferred his surmise to his people, pointing out that if they but prevented the creature from gathering more faggots there could be no more fire-blossoms. Acting instantly

upon the suggestion, a threatening circle was formed just out of reach of the fire itself.

But Gorn had not taken to account that inexplicable force driving the man to the aid of his companion. Finding his way barred on all sides he refused to acknowledge defeat. Turning upon himself he tore away part of what to the trees appeared to be his outer bark and threw it into the fire. Appalled, they saw him pluck it out flame-covered, and toss it into the air.

Taking the form of the fusim, the only flying thing of Venus, the coat slithered toward the captive man. Straightway Huj and Herul, his captors, dropped him just in time as the burn-thing enfolded him, falling flame-side out. That large chunk of burning life was too much for the horrified tree-ferns.

Had the great Ancadus tree-ferns but guessed the deadliness of those licking flame-tendrils they would have suffered the agonies of hell to stamp them out; but all they did was to gaze jealously, waiting for the fire-blossoms to fade away that they might again seize their prey. Those that had not been beset by the fire as yet were dubious, only half believing that the golden-red flowers were as hurtful as the screams of those who had felt their scorching breath made them out to be. Still, because they half believed, they stood back—waiting.

Meanwhile their erstwhile victim was having his own troubles. Fire is at best a treacherous friend, and though he had tossed the burning cloak from him, curls of fire had already eased themselves into his hair, his clothing. Slapping them did not avail and he dropped to the ground to roll and twist in an effort to put them out, only to aggravate them in a bed of dry brush that lay in his path. True, as long as the fire wreathed him he was safe from the trees, but at the same time his condition was precarious, too weak as he was to fight the fire properly. Piteously he called to the other to save him.

But the fire-breeder was in bad straits himself. Threatened on every side by the enemy, unable to gather more fuel, he had already removed his boots, was coaxing them to burn, when suddenly he spied something he had not seen before, an old log lying in the shadow of the space-ship. Using one charred shoe, in which a flame teased, as a shield he forced several tentacles to give way until he could grasp the log end. Dragging it to the fire, he thrust one end into the fire. But the log refused to burn! Gorn had forgotten that he had begged his people to let the visitors go unmolested. Now, in high glee he cried out: "He is defeated; And I, in my right, demand his blood. He is *mine!*" And as he spoke his tentacle shot across the clearing—only to dart away again in dismay. Even as he had spoken, the old log began to smoke; a feather of flame ran halfway up its length, died, only to be followed by a second tendril that bit deep into the butt.

Shouting his joy, the fire-breeder waited long enough for the fire to burn merrily; then like a flaming sword he used it to force the enemy to writhe away. One by one the menacing tentacles slithered to one side,

opening up the path that led to the side of the other man-creature who now lay as if dead, soot-blackened.

Beating out the flames that still wreathed him, the fire-breeder picked his comrade up and flung him over one shoulder. Then, pausing long enough to take a better grip upon the torch, he advanced, jabbing savagely at those tentacles not quick enough to give way.

Powerless to halt him, the Ancadus groaned in unison as he reached the cylinder and disappeared within with his burden, sealing the opening. But even as they lamented their loss and nursed their wounds, the cylinder gaped again, and the figure of the fire-breeder stood poised before him.

Exulting, the tree-ferns stared, then in one accord dozens of long arms shot out. This time they would have him! But no, the man was wary enough. Before the opening was resealed for the last time something came arching through the air to land at the roots of old Gorn. It was the flaming torch!

Again the Ancadus turned to their leader for advice. Should they try their strength upon the cylinder, crush it and pluck the creatures like *bav* from their hole? For the first time in their existence the old patriarch had no advice to give. He was more concerned with the hungry flames at his feet, one of which had already tested the texture of an old gnarled root that had broken through the forest loam.

The next instant the cylinder was taking to the air, filling the forest with an ugly roar. Then it was level with the fern-crowns. For a moment it seemed to hang suspended between land and sky. And to the horror of the Ancadus its rear end seemed to ignite—in a great blast of withering fire.

The fire-breeder had his revenge as the long tongue of flame bit deeply into the heart of the Ancadus grove. With his departure a new sound came into the forest, a deep throaty roar interspersed with strange unnamable creakings and cracklings wherein were intermingled the cries of the dying race, the loudest of which was the shriek of old Gorn.

Once inoculated with the virus of the fire, the whole world seemed ready to burn as immense flowers reared their angry, licking flames into the tallest perches of the forest, devouring everything in their path.

Elsel, the young free-moving tree-fern who had taken his hurt to the river, a good quarter of a mile from the clearing, there to lave his tentacle in the flood, saw the flame-flowers advance, apparently pushing the small band of perambulatory ferns that hurried ahead of them, toward the river.

All the world burns, the young ferns told Elsel; all are gone—Gorn, Naxum, Tunnux, Nushu, Geeb, Masur—all the great ones, all the middle-aged, all the newly rooted—all, all consumed by the ravenous flame-flowers that the intruders had loosed into their paradise. All were gone. All.

Standing on the river bank they waited, fearful, uncertain. They knew they could launch themselves upon the broad river, float upon its bosom into new lands; or they could cross the river to the salt barrens into which no self-respecting perambulatory tree-fern ever treads.

But their own hesitancy closed the first path as the fluorescent flames were seen to gather at the river's edge, a few hundred feet below, hissing as their fiery tongues tasted that liquid flood, painting the overhead clouds in their lurid light.

Out in space the fire-breeder saw that same pyrotechnical glow, saw in his mind's eye that calorific hell that he, a modern Prometheus, had engendered upon the bosom of Venus.

# The Book of Worlds

by Miles J. Breuer

*This story was written twenty-two years ago, in 1929. That was but a few months before the Crash that ushered in the long unsettled period of depression, social turmoil, misery, and wars . . . a period which has not ended. The Book of Worlds tells of possible futures, and the future which has actually unrolled since its writing seems to fulfill all too hideously a pattern it predicted. By the time you have finished reading it, glance through your papers and wonder whether the man who was placed in a sanitarium was the crazy one or whether it was not rather those outside the asylum walls that deserved—and deserve—that diagnosis.*

TO psychiatrists, Professor Cosgrave's case is a striking study in the compensatory psychosis. He perches on the edge of his bed in a private sanitarium for mental diseases, and coos and twitters and waves a wreath of twigs in his lips. Whether he will ever recover his sanity or not is problematical. Whether anyone else will ever be able to understand and use his hyper-stereoscope is also problematical. And whether, if it were figured out, anyone would ever have the courage to use it, in the face of what happened to Professor Cosgrave, is still further remote in the realms of doubt and conjecture.

I have repeated the story for medical men so many times, that I am beginning to see a sort of logical sequence in things that at first utterly bewildered me. As Professor Cosgrave's chief assistant, I was undoubtedly closer to him and knew more about his work and about the mechanism of his tragic fate, than anyone else. The physicists who merely went over his apparatus and equations and did not know the man, did not grasp the significance of what happened, as did I, who lived and worked with him every day and many a night.

Yes, the thing begins to look logical to me now, after it has been on my mind constantly for several months. As no one else has been able to understand exactly what happened, I ought to do my best to render a consecutive account of events.

Professor Hemingsford Cosgrave was the most highly civilized man I have ever known. If mankind is in truth becoming more civilized as time goes on, then it is following in the footsteps of such advanced and refined examples of human progress as was my late superior in the School of

Physics. He was a small, delicate-looking man, with classical Greek features; with very little physical strength but with infinite physical endurance. To spend day and night in his laboratory for a week on end seemed to produce no deleterious effects upon him.

When I extol the rare combination of mathematical genius and experimental ability of this man, so well known, I am wasting my breath. But the world does not know so much about his other exquisitely subtle mental sensibilities. He was a poet and an artist; he saw all the beauty in *Cosmos* with a wondering eye. And he was as gently sympathetic as a woman. The reports of famine victims suffering in China disturbed him at his experiments. His student-assistants would conspire to guard him against the visits of the old Salvation Army Captain, who more than once lured him away from his desk, with the tale of some woman or child in distress. He was the last man in the world to be permitted to witness the horrors, that he said he saw.

A little over two years ago, he and I were planning together a demonstration, for his class in *Quadratics*. We had considered making models of some of the solids, with whose equations the class was working; but the time and labor involved in this was almost out of question under the circumstances. I suggested that the Mathematics Department of the University of Chicago had all of these models already made. We solved the problem by my going to Chicago and photographing these models with a stereoscopic camera. The prints of the strangely shaped solids, viewed in a stereoscope, were quite as satisfactory for class purposes as would have been the models.

I had brought the pile of cards to Professor Cosgrave for approval. He had run through three or four of them, and seemed quite pleased. Suddenly he laid them down and stared at me.

"Do you know what just struck me?" he asked in a queer tone.

I shook my head.

"You know what I'm working on?" he asked.

"You mean your Expansion Equations—?"

"Popularly called the Fourth Dimension." He smiled at the thought. "And you know what I've begun to suspect about it, especially since the experiment with the gyroscope?"

"Yes, I do—though it's hard for me to grasp that there really might be another dimension. I've always considered the fourth dimension a mathematical abstraction."

"No abstraction."

He said it as one might say, two and two make four.

"Really something here. Do you see the connection now?" He shook the stereoscope at me.

I shook my head. I felt helpless. His mind was always far ahead of mine. He explained:

"This instrument takes a two-dimensional figure on a flat plane and builds it up so that the brain sees it as a three-dimensional solid in space!"

He waited for me to grasp his idea, which I still failed to do. He smiled indulgently.

"If the fourth dimension is really a dimension and not a mathematical abstraction—" he smiled confidentially as he emphasized the *if*; "can we not build a hyper-stereoscopic instrument which will build up a three-dimensional model of a fourth-dimensional object into an image perceptible to the brain in its true four-dimensional form?"

I continued to stare blankly from him to the stereoscope and back again.

"As a matter of fact," he continued; "our three-dimensional world is merely a *cross-section* cut by what we know as *space* out of the Cosmos that exists in four or more dimensions. Our three-dimensional world bears the same relation to the true status of affairs as do these flat photographs to the models that you photographed. Surely you can grasp that from our equations?"

"Yes," I assented eagerly, glad to find familiar ground to rest my feet on; "just as the present time is a cross-section of infinity cut by a moving space-sector whose motion is irreversible; it moves in one direction only."

He beamed at me for that. Then in silence he finished looking over the geometrical stereograms and handed them to me.

He spent six months working out his idea on paper. He did not discuss his plans with me very much; but he did give me sections of the problems to work out. For instance, he asked me to work out the equations for the projection of a tesseractoid:

$$c_1u^4 + c_2x^4 + c_3y^4 + c_4z^4 = k^4$$

from eight different directions, each opposing pair of right angles to the other three pairs. Most of the problems he gave me were projection problems; but beyond that I could not grasp the drift of his work.

Then he spent a year in experimental work. As I am a mathematician and not a laboratory man, I had less to do with the actual construction of the hyperstereoscope. But even there I helped. I worked at the refractive indices of crystals that he made in an electric furnace; and I worked out the mathematics of a very ingenious instrument for integrating light rays from two directions into one composite beam.

Apparently the thing was a complex job. Professor Cosgrave spent three weeks in the research laboratory of the Mechanical Engineering Department. He went to Chicago and remained there for a couple of months, leaving as his address the Psychology Department of the Chicago University. One day he announced to me calmly that the hyperstereoscope was finished.

"May I look?" I asked eagerly, expecting to be able to see out into the fourth dimension.

The instrument was pointed out of the window at the campus. It had three telescopes arranged in the form of a triangular parallelepiped. One end of the room was full of apparatus, electron tubes and photo-electric cells, a scanning disk, and tangles of wire strung between boxes and cabinets faced with dials and meters. At a small table there were two oculars to look into. I put my eyes to them.

It made me dizzy. It looked like rolling vapors—dense, heavy vapors,

and boiling clouds, rolling and turmoiling swiftly and dizzily. It looked vibrant with heat. Through a rift here and there I got glimpses of a glowing liquid, like the white-hot metal in a foundry coming from the ladle. There were boiling, bubbling lakes of it. I shrank away from the instrument.

"What is it?" I gasped.

"I'm not sure," returned Professor Cosgrave. "Prolonged observation and correlation of observed data will be necessary before we can explain what we see."

He was whirling dials rapidly. I looked again. There were vapors, but they were thin spirals and wisps. Mostly there were bare, smoking rocks. There was a bleak, insufferably dreary stretch of them, extending on into the infinite distance. It looked hot. It was infinitely depressing. I didn't like it.

I stood for a long time behind Professor Cosgrave, as he sat at one little table with his eyes to the oculars of the instrument and twiddled the dials. I was about to turn around and slip out of the room and leave him to play with it alone, when he sat up suddenly. A new idea had struck him.

"Beyond a doubt these places that we see are regions of some sort, not in our 'space' at all, or else infinitely far away. But, in the direction of the fourth dimension they are quite near us. Just as if you are in a window on the top story of a skyscraper office building and a dozen feet away is a man in the window of an adjacent building. To your three-dimensional vision he is quite near you. But to your body, whose motion is confined to two-dimensional surfaces, your friend is a long distance away. To your touch, instead of a dozen feet away he is a quarter of a mile away; that is how far you have to travel before you can reach him.

"Or, if I make a mark at each end of this sheet of paper and then bend the sheet double, from a three-dimensional standpoint the marks are a millimeter apart. But from a two-dimensional standpoint they are thirty centimeters apart.

"This stereoscope *sees across*, in the same way, to some other universe."

He shook his head.

"My analogies are poor. It is a difficult idea to express. But look!"

I went to the eye-pieces. There was water. It was endless. Just water. It swelled and rolled and pulsed. A swing of the telescopes over at the window brought into view some black rocks. Over the rocks was slime. A slime that flowed and rounded itself into worm-like forms. It was hideous. I left the gloating Professor Cosgrave and hurried away.

After that, as my recollection serves, things moved rapidly. I saw him a couple of days later at his stereoscope.

"I have it!" he said elatedly when he saw me. I hastened to look into the instrument.

"No!" he exclaimed, pulling me away. "I mean an analogy. Like points on the leaves of a book. You see?"

I nodded. He continued.

"Points on the adjacent leaves of a book are far apart, considered two-dimensionally. But, with the book closed, and to a three-dimensional per-



ception which can see across from one page to another, the two points are very near together. You see?"

I nodded again.

"Now look!"

I saw a dense swamp, among huge trees with broad, rich green leaves. Gigantic saurians stalked about and splashed hugely.

"It is like a story of evolution," I couldn't help remarking.

He nodded in satisfaction and mused on:

"Each of these must be a separate and distinct world. I can go back and forth among them at will. It is not a continuous story. There are steps. Definite jumps. Nothing between. I can see any one of them at any time. Like the leaves of a book!"

I looked again. The professor had not touched the setting and the scene was exactly the same. A huge saurian was devouring some living creature from the water. The water was threshed into a pink foam, and light-red blood was splashed over the green foliage. The professor was talking:

"What we see is worlds or universes arranged side by side in the fourth dimension. Like leaves in a book. 'Heavens! What an encyclopedial'"

"I see," I said slowly, not sure that I really did. "Like serial sections cut in a microtome."

"Comparable. But not really sections. Separate worlds. Three-dimensional worlds like our own. Side by side, each of them one page ahead of the preceding. Three-dimensional leaves in a four-dimensional book."

It was a little difficult to grasp. I thought a while.

"I'd like to have Carver of Purdue see this," I said. "Do you remember his article in the *Scientific Monthly* about your four-space equations? It was almost personal. Ill-becoming to a scientific man. I'd give my shirt to see his face when he sees this. Let's bring him down."

Professor Cosgrave shook his head.

"What object can there be in causing the man any unpleasant feeling? The world holds enough unpleasant situations without our multiplying them. I shall break the news to him pleasantly when the opportunity presents itself."

That was typical of Professor Cosgrave. That is just how considerate and sympathetic he always was. Always he was trying to spare other people unpleasantness or discomfort. The man was wasted on our present-day selfish and discourteous age. He ought to have been born into some future Utopia.

What would he do now? I wondered. There was obviously a vast number of worlds to observe. It would take a lifetime to have a good look at each one of them. Would he spend his time on satisfying his curiosity and turn his back on mathematical physics? He still had numerous important problems ahead of him in the latter field. He was barely started on his career as a mathematical physicist, yet the world was expecting great things of him.

However, for the present there was apparently one phase of the purely observational pursuit for him.

"The 'leaves' in this book seem to be arranged in absolutely orderly succession," he said. "By chance I began at the end where the evolutionary

development was lowest. By swinging my visual field through the unknown dimension in one direction, I can see the worlds in succession, each a little further evolved than the preceding. Now, I'm a physicist, and cannot afford to waste much time in gratifying idle curiosity. But, I must spend a few days or weeks in following out this evolutionary series before I turn it over to some biologist. This is too much of a temptation for any kind of a scientific man."

For several days I would come into the room and see him there with his eyes glued to the oculars, too absorbed even to notice my entrance. His attitude was one of tense and motionless concentration. I would steal out again, loath to disturb him. Once I came in and noted that he was trembling violently all over as he gazed into the machine. A couple of days later I found him in the same position, as though he had not moved since I had been there last. His whole body was set and rigid. I was alarmed at the way he looked. I stepped closer; his jaw was set and his breathing was shallow.

I felt concerned about him, and I made a sound to attract his attention. He started suddenly and leaped to his feet, and turned to me a face that was white with horror.

"I've been a student!" he gasped. "A scientific man. I never stopped to realize that men were like that." He sank into a chair, his hands on his knees, his head drooped.

I looked into the stereoscope. This time there were men. An army stood drawn up, with shining helmets and fluttering pennants, extending far into the dim distance. The foreground was red and active; everything was splattered with blood; men were swinging swords. There were rows of captives and men cutting their heads off. I watched only a second before I recoiled, but saw a dozen heads roll on the ground and fountains of blood gush over victims and executioners alike.

"You have no business looking at that!" I exclaimed.

It was incongruous. This delicately organized, unselfish, tenderhearted man to be spending his days gazing at those things.

"It's been that way from the beginning," he whispered, shuddering. "Ever since rudimentary humans appeared in the series . . . war, brutality, cruelty, wanton killing of people . . ."

But I couldn't keep him away from the thing. He called me to it and explained:

"As far as I can understand this, I am swinging the field of view through an arc in a dimension that extends at right angles to the three known dimensions. At intervals I see a world. In between there is nothing. The swing is accomplished by changing the intensity of the electrical field through crystals of this zirconium compound, which alters their refractivity.

"I am going steadily down my scale toward zero. The worlds are getting further and further advanced in the scale of evolution. I can see it clearly now."

In a moment he was back at the instrument, completely absorbed, and oblivious of me. I was worried about him. I came in daily to watch him,

and many a time I came and went without his having been conscious of my presence. There was something wrong about the thing; the intense absorption of a man of his sympathetic type in scenes of inhumanity such as I had seen. One day when I opened the door, he was facing it, waiting for me.

"I am nearly at zero. Look! A world much like ours."

In the lenses I saw the buildings of a city, rather odd, but for all the world suggesting London or Paris; swarming crowds of people, hurrying vehicles. It was quite like our world, but just enough different so that I was sure it was not our world.

Professor Cosgrave was pale and agitated.

"Man's inhumanity to man!" he moaned. "It would drive me distracted, were there not one hope. Just now, in that fair city, I watched a mob drag men and women through the streets and stick their bodies up on poles on a bridge; and blood dripped into the river."

"But, step by step, there is more intellect, more material progress. There is hope that man will eventually develop intelligence enough to stop his senseless and cruel fighting, and learn cooperation and altruism. Each of these worlds seems to bring us a little nearer to that."

He called my attention as he turned his dials to zero, and looked into the instrument. He turned to me with a queer smile.

"Look!"

I applied my eye again. There was the campus and athletic field, the gravel drives and the men's dormitory. Through the stereoscope or through the window, I got the same view.

"At zero we see our own 'plane' of the unknown dimension. *Our* page in the book. You see?"

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now negative potential values. Now to see the pages ahead of us in the book. Worlds further evolved than ours. The future! Up to the limits of the inductance of my coils!"

His eyes glowed and his breath came fast.

"The future!" he whispered as he bent over the oculars and carefully turned his dials. "In the future lies man's hope. In intelligence and science!"

Again he sat in motionless absorption. Occasionally he touched a dial or whispered to himself. Finally, as he said not a word for a half hour, I tipped out.

The next day I found him staringly expecting my arrival with wide-open eyes, like a man with exophthalmic goiter.

"I don't know what makes me go on with this!" he gasped. "Men are beasts. Hopeless. They never will be anything else. Twenty airplanes went over a city dropping bombs. Swept it away. It is burning now. In one place I saw through the smoke a small child hemmed in a courtyard by flames. A city as grand as Chicago. A sea of smoke and flame." He sat with his head bowed in his hands.

I didn't know what to say. He seemed utterly crushed; I could not rouse him. Finally I led him out of the room, got him in my car, and took him

home. I pondered on how I might get him away from that machine for a while.

But the next day he was back again at the machine. I had classes until four o'clock that afternoon. Then I hurried into the laboratory. I found a changed man.

He was stern and determined. This rather relieved me; for I had been worried about his hopeless depression, and I did not realize what was taking place in the man. It seemed to me then that he had shaken off the depression and had determined to do something about the situation of war and humanity.

"Here is a world thousands of years ahead of ours," he related. "Humanity crowds it densely beyond our conception. Thank God, it is another world somewhere else, and not ours. People have not risen an inch from bestiality in millennia. No—stay away from it; I can't permit you to witness such horrors. Men and women soldiers piled up in mangled, bloody heaps as high as the Capitol Building. Each belch of that machine kills a thousand more—stay away!"

"It is not our world. We can still save our world from that. We start today, Harlan, you and I, to prevent such things from happening in our world."

"We've got to stop it!" he said again. But he sat and stared into the instrument.

I was puzzled and not a little alarmed. The sudden, stern determination of the gentle little man fitted him most strangely. I would have thought him play-acting for my benefit, had he not looked most terribly grim. Anyway, I was relieved to see that terrible depression had left him, and that he had got hold of himself. That is what I thought then.

He permitted me to lead him out again, and I took him home. He kept saying with grim determination:

"Not to *our* human race! We *won't* let it happen!"

On the following day I had no classes, and I called for him at his home early in the morning. He had already left. I hurried to his laboratory. He was already there, spinning dials feverishly, and then bending over the lenses. He had an unusual, nervous air about him.

"Destructive rays!" he said to me as I came in, but without looking away from the oculars. "Wither up a thousand people like snowflakes in a chimney-blast. Terrific explosives. Deadly gases. Bombs filled with disease germs. Diabolical inventiveness."

He whirled around and faced me.

"Everything indicates that our world is part of this scheme. It is going the same way. It will be what this is. We must stop it."

He stood up in the middle of the room and talked, and I took the opportunity to peer into the lenses. I saw a dead world. Wreckage. Ashes. Explosion holes. Disintegrating bodies. Nowhere a movement. Even vegetable life had withered. There was a pile of bombs ready to fire beside a huge gun and a gunner lay dead beside them.

There was a queer declamatory quality to the speech that Professor Cos-

grave was making. He said queer, silly things about Universal Peace. And yet I didn't suspect.

Only the next morning when I came in, it dawned on me. He was perched on a tall stool, with a wreath of twigs in his lips. As I came in, he put the wreath around his neck, and sang in a high key:

"I am the Dove of Peace.

Listen to me: All men are brothers.

There shall be no more war.

I shall spread my wings over the world.

I am the Dove of Peace."

Tears sprang to my eyes as the truth suddenly dawned upon me. I gulped as I hurried to another room to telephone. Poor Professor Cosgrave!

Then, as they led him out, I looked into the lenses. There was a rugged stretch, smooth, gently undulating holts and hummocks as far as the eye could reach, covered with a slimy, disgusting fungus growth. Here and there the fungus covered a ragged shape suggesting the ruined wall of a building. There was no change in this scene during the four days before the machine's batteries ran down (for I did not know how to shut it off). Now, no one knows how to operate it.

Professor Cosgrave knows me. He is always glad to see me at his room at the sanitarium. But he talks to me only about Universal Brotherhood and about my duty to save mankind from strife and bloodshed. And he flaps his arms like wings and coos.

# The Rebuff

by Lord Dunsany

*You have probably read of speculations regarding the problem of signalling to Mars and of decoding signals from Mars, should the Martians deign to return the greeting. Lord Dunsany, whose "Jorkens" stories show a sly sense of humor at the mysteries of the universe, has presented in this very short story a not too impossible—considering the state of this world—solution.*

"YOU may not know," said Rowston, "that some time in the last century a woman left a will providing money to communicate with Mars."

Talk had got very scientific in the Billiards Club, and Rowston, who was the most scientific man we have got there, was having it all his own way.

"She was a Frenchwoman," he went on, "and the scientists to whom the money was left had decided to mark out in bonfires all over the North of France the diagram of that wonderful proposition from the first book of Euclid, which proves that the square on the base of any right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the sides. It is really a wonderful problem, for it's hardly a thing you would think of to look at it. It seems so unlikely that, whatever the shape of a triangle, provided that one of its angles was a right angle, those squares would always be exactly equal; that is to say that the big one would always exactly equal the medium one and the little one added together. I often wonder how it was it ever occurred to Euclid."

"And what good was that going to do?" asked one of our members, who was not so much interested in science as golf.

"You see," said Rowston, "those French scientists had worked out that the people of Mars, being more intelligent than us, having started sooner, on account of their planet being smaller, and so cooling quicker than ours, would know all the things that we knew, as well as getting over a good many of our mistakes. To sum up their argument in a few words, they said that no highly intelligent people could be ignorant of that odd fact about those squares; and when they saw the diagram they would know that we were intelligent too. Then it would be up to them to answer."

"And what happened?" one of us asked.

"What happened was," said Rowston, "that the French government de-

cided the woman was mad, and her legacy frivolous, and refused to allow the money to go where she had directed. It went instead to her relations. And, if she was mad, it seems to me that it might have been rather dangerous to let her relations have all the money, for they may have had a touch of insanity in them too; and the more money they had, the better chance the insanity would have to come out."

"She was not mad," said Jorkens.

"What do you mean?" said Rowston sharply, for he does not much like assertions from others when he is talking science.

"She was perfectly sane," said Jorkens. "The sign was eventually made, and Mars answered."

"Mars answered?" we said.

And Rowston sat perfectly silent.

"Yes," said Jorkens. "I believe those scientists never really accepted their government's decision. They were never really satisfied with it. What they did was quietly collect funds, which took them a very long time, and most of them died before they collected much money. In fact they are all dead long ago. But the idea went on; and collecting very quietly, so as never to let the idea get out among the people who might think them crazy, they raised enough money to do what they wanted a few years before the Great War."

"And how do you know?" asked Rowston.

"Because I happened to know the one man who was able to make out Mars' answer," replied Jorkens.

"And why don't *we* know?" asked Rowston.

"Because it was all hushed up," said Jorkens.

"Hushed up?" replied Rowston.

"Yes," said Jorkens. "They lit their bonfires all right, not in France of course, because it had been decided there that the notion was crazy; and nowhere in Europe, because ideas spread pretty quickly through Europe nowadays. They went to the northern Sahara, and there they marked out the great diagram of that proposition of Euclid. No one to interfere with them there except a few Arabs, who of course thought them mad too, but didn't trouble them in any way, because they regard madness as the affliction of God and not a matter for human interference. They must have raised a very large sum in the course of forty years, for the cost of transport alone must have been stupendous, water and timber and food being completely alien to the Sahara. But they found camels enough, and were able to do it. And one night they lit their enormous lines of bonfires. And Mars answered."

"Mars answered?" said Rowston.

"Yes, in little more than a week," said Jorkens. "They were wonderfully quick at it. And they sent a diagram too."

"What did they send?" asked Rowston.

"They lit bonfires," said Jorkens, "as we did. It wasn't so easy for them to signal to us as for us to signal to them, because they being further from

the sun have the whole of their disc shining at us, whereas much of ours is often in darkness to them; but the people who made our signal picked up theirs with their telescope. And a good deal flattered they were by Mars' rapid response."

"And the diagram?" asked Rowston.

"They replied with another right-angled triangle," said Jorkens, "but with different arrangements from ours."

And at the word arrangements, applied to geometry, Rowston snorted audibly.

"It had one of the sides produced," Jorkens went on, "to a distance about equal to its original length, while the other side was produced to about four times its length, stretching North to South across the plains of Mars. How they made such an enormous design in a week puzzled everybody who knew of it. Another thing that puzzled them was that there seemed no exact proportion in length of the lines produced."

"You say that the length of one of the sides was doubled and the other quadrupled," said Rowston judicially.

"Yes," said Jorkens, "but not exactly. The right-angled triangle was exact, but not the proportion of the produced sides. That inexactitude, as it seemed to these men, puzzled them. They realized that the sign must have enormous significance, and that it had been made by a people of vast ability, as the speed with which they had answered clearly showed, and yet they could find no mathematical formula for one exact length of the lines. Of course they were mostly mathematical men themselves, and expected the people of Mars to be the same, which was only reasonable when they saw those people using a mathematical diagram.

"They worried over it for weeks, a little group of men working out geometric formulae, knowing that they had received a message from folk who relied on them to understand it, and yet not being able to make head or tail of the message. And in the end it turned out to be an extremely simple one. Perhaps they overestimated the intricacy of the diagram, and were looking for something deeper than the message they actually got. One man worked it out, or rather it came to him in a flash, an old fellow called Priteau. It was a great shock to him: it was a great shock to them all. And in the end they hushed the whole matter up. What Priteau hoped, and what they all hoped, was that the people of Mars have no hatred of us but only of our civilization, the civilization that is based so much on machinery, which in its turn owes all to mathematics; they believed that Mars had been through it all and had cast it away in disgust. And it is Priteau's theory that the sight of a geometrical figure had infuriated them, so that they had hastily sent that message."

"But what was the message?" asked Rowston. Which was what we all wanted to know.

"Well," said Jorkens, "they all say now that that wasn't the message at all; but it obviously was, or they wouldn't have taken the trouble they did to hush it up; and, besides that, you can see it for yourselves by drawing



the figure on paper: it is very easily done, a long straight line, as I told you, going from North to South, and a shorter line at the top going away at right angles, and then—"

"Like a signpost," said an ordinary member with no taste for science.

"Wait a minute," said Jorkens. "You've forgotten the base of the triangle. Signposts don't usually have cross-bars."

"Why no," said another of us. "More like a gallows, you mean."

"The message," said Jorkens, "simply meant 'Go and hang yourselves.'"

THE END

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